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The Catastrophe Remembered by the Non-Traumatic: Counternarratives on the Cultural Revolution in Chinese Literature of the 1990s

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by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2004

Dedication

To my personal savior, Jesus Christ, who touched my life and sent me the message that love never fails.

To the memory of my father, who loved me and influenced my life tremendously.

To my mother, who always believes in me, encourages me, supports me, and feels proud of me.

To my husband, Chu-ong, whose optimistic attitude towards life affects people around him and brings hope and happiness to our family.

To my precious son, Daniel (Dou Dou), whose heavenly smiles never fail to melt my heart. Special love to a special you.

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer a special thanks to Dr. Yvonne Sung-sheng Chang, my academic advisor, who has supervised my study during the past six years and helped me in numerous ways. My appreciation also goes to Dr. Margherita Zanasi and Dr. Avron Boretz. Taking your classes and having opportunities to discuss various questions with you have been inspiring and rewarding experiences for me. I would also like to thank Dr. Qing Zhang and Dr. Ban Wang, who cordially took the responsibility to serve on my dissertation committee. Finally, I would like to thank the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. It is in this department where I faced and overcame many challenges in my life, received valuable academic training, and discovered my own potential.

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Publication No._____

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2004

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After its demise in 1976, the Cultural Revolution has been conventionally portrayed as an era of political persecution, a "cultural desert," an ascetic regime, and a decade of total chaos. Contested memories of this period, however, appeared in literary writings of the 1990s: memories that placed in the foreground self-motivated learning, sexual indulgence, juvenile adventure and mundane living. Remembering the Cultural Revolution from the perspectives of the non-traumatic, these narratives allowed certain social groups and individuals to forge new identities beyond that of the political victim.

My dissertation studies these alternative narratives that "detraumatize" the Cultural Revolution, paying special attention to the actions and relations of literary producers who played a significant role in defining the discursive

functions of these works. I argue that, while sharing a common gesture of redeeming personal histories from a collective past, these narratives were used in various ways to serve the needs of the present. In different cases, the construction of an “alternative reality” of the Cultural Revolution could serve as a coping strategy that fulfils personal or psychological needs, as a means to legitimize new intellectual trends, as a way to boost an emerging cultural fashion, or as a weapon with which cultural agents contend for positions in a drastically restructured cultural field.

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Introduction

DOMINANT NARRATIVES AND COUNTERNARRATIVES ON THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN CONTEMPOARY CHINESE LITERATURE

Ever since it reached a denouement in 1976, the Cultural Revolution has become the object of study in the fields of historical, cultural and political theories.[1] In the West, the magnitude of the impact of the Cultural Revolution has stirred up heated debate and led to conflicting views on history.[2] In China, retrospective views on the Cultural Revolution varied in both intensity and thrust.[3] While certain discussions of this history have been constantly censored by the government, this history has been featured in numerous films, spawned an industry of memoirs, and inspired many works of fiction.

One of the most important events in the history of the People's Republic (PRC), the Cultural Revolution has been conventionally described as a painful experience for the whole nation and the people who endured it. In literary creations, different social groups and individuals from varying perspectives carried on the condemnation of the Cultural Revolution. Older generations of

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[1] Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966 with the agenda to purify the Chinese Communist Party, which had been corrupted, as Mao believed, by the creeping influence of bourgeois thinking and antisocialist tendencies in the country. This ten-year political campaign totally reshaped the sociopolitical landscape of contemporary Chinese society. After Mao's death in 1976, the Cultural Revolution ended with a gradual reorientation of political, economic, cultural and diplomatic policies.

[2] According to J. Guo, the Western scholars were divided into two major groups. Some view this movement as a model for revolutionary ideology, popular insurgency, alternative modernity, and counterculture. Others denounce it as an utmost disaster, an extreme example of Mao-style totalitarianism and authoritarian politics (1999, 343).

[3] For a detailed discussion of the discursive continuity and change of such views, see Dittmer 1996-1997, 1-20.

writers and scholars denounced the political persecutions they suffered, while former Red Guards and educated youths complained about the cultural impoverishment they experienced in their formative years. Many charged the Cultural Revolution as a repressive and inhumane period since it caused gender erasure and sexual frustration. Others criticized the Cultural Revolution as especially devastating for children because of the disintegration of former social agencies of authority such as schools and parents. In short, the dominant narratives on the Cultural Revolution shared this one thing in common: they were all speaking to a sympathetic audience on behalf of the trauma survivors. Representing the Cultural Revolution from the standpoint of the victims, these narratives served special social functions and established certain thematic prototypes in their integration of personal memories into dominant narratives on this history.[4]

Although the Cultural Revolution has been conventionally remembered as a traumatic period for both the individual and the nation, in some essays and fictional works produced in the 1990s, this history was addressed from the perspective of the *non-traumatic*. For instance, some scholars deny the conventional view that the Cultural Revolution was a "cultural desert." In their essays, this period was characterized by self-motivated intellectual pursuits and underground cultural activities. In other works, rather than a historical catastrophe, the Cultural Revolution is variedly perceived as a sexual carnival, a

[4] In my research, I define "narrative" as the recounting of story or event presented in writings. In relation to this, I define "counternarrative" as the recounting of story or event in writings that constructs alternative visions to stereotypical or dominant representations of them.

playful adolescent adventure, or simply a part of the mundane reality of everyday life.

When a trauma-ridden collective memory of the Cultural Revolution is diluted by numerous modes of personal remembrance, it redefines the relationship between the subject of the memory (the conscious self) and the object to be remembered (the perceived reality). As long as the Cultural Revolution experiences are remembered as generational testimonies and allegories of a national trauma, people are collectively bestowed the sometimes unwarranted status of political victims. When the Cultural Revolution is manifested in contested memories, however, the very narrators of these memories become the subjects of remembering who hold the power to establish their own subjectivity.

The theme of my dissertation is the examination of these literary narratives that "detraumatize" the Cultural Revolution, a topic that has yet to receive adequate scholarly attention. This research has two main objectives. First, it aims at redressing the marginality of the study of the Cultural Revolution narratives from the 1990s, since in the past two decades (1976-2000) most of the relevant research has been done on literary works produced in the late 1970s and the 1980s. Second, it seeks to broaden the scope of studying the transition of Cultural Revolution memories in the 1990s. While most of the relevant research deals with the industry of the Cultural Revolution and the commercialism of Maoism, my dissertation brings to light a usually ignored yet quite important field of research: that is, how essay and fiction, literary genres conventionally regarded

as “serious literature,” were involved in the reorganization of the memories of the Cultural Revolution.

Taking counternarratives on the Cultural Revolution as the primary object of my research, I will nevertheless devote part of this dissertation to the pre-1990s narratives. Describing the changes in the construction of Cultural Revolution narratives in contemporary Chinese essays and fiction, I investigate how literature serves as a site of struggle between literary producers in their usages of a specific past to meet the needs of the present. Studying literary works that “detraumatize” the Cultural Revolution, I point out that alternative narratives on this history did not appear only in the 1990s. Among the educated youth literature, in some memoirs and fiction written by persecuted intellectuals, certain Cultural Revolution experiences have been retrieved in a mild, humorous, or even nostalgic mode. For instance, Yang Jiang’s *Ganxiao liuji* [Six chapters from my life “downunder,” 1984] describes the sent-down life of Yang and her husband Qian Zhongshu, a preeminent scholar of Western and traditional Chinese literature. In this essay collection, their experiences, such as planting vegetables and drilling a well, are portrayed more as personal adventures than as laborious mistreatments suffered by many intellectuals. In Shi Tiesheng’s award-winning novella *Wo de yaoyuan de qingpingwan* [My remote Qingpingwan, 1983], the handicapped hero “I” lives a peaceful life in an isolated Shanxi village as a sent-down youth, surrounded by docile cattle herds and immersed in the care of the sympathetic local peasants. Yet, what draws my interest is not a single text that presents an alternative view on the Cultural Revolution, but the narratives that

confront specific thematic prototypes associated with certain dominant narratives on this history. More specifically, the object of my study is not the writings that preserve cherished personal memories from past sufferings, but the works that purport to create alternative "realities" to "detraumatize" the Cultural Revolution, which undermine established narratives that claim a collective victim identity to this history.

LITERARY TREATMENT OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN THE LATE 1970S AND THE 1980S

To understand the significance and function of counternarratives on the Cultural Revolution in literature of the 1990s, it is necessary to compare them with the narratives of blame that dominated the literary treatment of this history during the first decade of the post-Mao period. Literary narratives on the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s and 1980s were very much a product of the politics of its own time. Critic Li Tuo once stated that there were two different kinds of literature competing for the domination of the Chinese literary stage in the first decade of the post-Mao era. The first was the conservative, traditionalist, mostly party or party-faction approved triad consisting of scar literature (*shanghen wenxue*), reform literature (*gaige wenxue*) and reportage. The second, and far more interesting in both thematic and artistic terms, was the triad of misty poetry (*menglong shi*), root-seeking fiction (*xungen xiaoshuo*) and avant-garde fiction (*xianfeng xiaoshuo*) (1990, 94). Despite their differences in ideological stance and artistic conceptions, both deal with the memories of the Cultural Revolution in various ways.

As the first influential literary trend that emerged in the post-Mao era, scar literature blames family tragedies and individual miseries during the Cultural Revolution on the persecution manipulated by a few culprits such as Lin Biao and the "Gang of Four." Opening the floodgate for people to grieve over their misfortunate, scar literature also serves to discredit Deng Xiaoping's political enemies and to rally popular support of Deng's call to "bring order out of chaos" (*boluan fanzheng*).

Whereas reform literature and reportage focus on the "present," they function to smooth down the trauma of the Cultural Revolution by portraying Deng's years as a new page in the history of the People's Republic. Featuring themes such as the system reform of the state enterprises, the establishment of the "responsibility system" in the rural areas, the appearance of the independent proprietors, the emergence of the joint venture, the redress of historical mistakes (*pingfan*), and the exposure of the current social problems, these works propagate the economic developments and social changes in Deng's China, which lessens the magnitude of the disastrous sequels caused by its immediate prehistory.

If scar literature, reform literature and reportage are incorporated into the reconstruction of official ideology as political weapons, the writers of misty poetry disguise their messages in abstruse language whenever they wish to speak of the Cultural Revolution. The "mistiness" of these poems, as Sheng-Mei Ma points out, has more to do with the social rejection and political pressure than conscious artistic innovation (1987, 83-6).

Following misty poetry, which pioneers in the metaphorical representation of the Cultural Revolution in literature, some writers raised the banner of "root-seeking fiction" at the end of 1985. In the root-seeking fiction, these former sent-down youth summon their memories of rural lives in backward, remote locales. Characterized by isolated lifestyle and provincial local customs, the living situations of peasants described in the root-seeking fiction are often endowed with specific cultural and historical connotations. Carrying on the agenda of seeking the "roots" of Chinese history and culture, these writers act as a collective cultural agent to represent the reflective spirit of the nation after a historical catastrophe, and serve as introspective historical subjects taking on the responsibility of inquiring the essence of an ambiguous national "past."

Diversified in thematic concerns and language styles, avant-garde fiction also contributes to the reorganization of Cultural Revolution memories. Critic Henry Y.H. Zhao has observed how the Cultural Revolution has served as a latent background in the works of avant-garde writers even when their works do not address the issue of the Cultural Revolution directly (1991, 33-8). Studying the avant-garde fiction in terms of their representations of historical trauma, Xiaobin Yang argues that works by representative writers such as Yu Hua and Can Xue present not the concrete violence of a traumatic past, but the brutal and maniac effect this past imposes on a consciousness that refuses to be incorporated into rational and comprehensible interpretations (2002, 47-55).

Characterizing the avant-garde fiction on the Cultural Revolution as "narration of absurdity" (*huangdan xushi*), Xu Zidong goes further to analyze the

social function of relevant narratives. To Xu, “absurdity” bears two meanings. First, it refers to a tendency to describe the Cultural Revolution as an unexplainable, reason-denying event. Second, it features plot developments that go against the common logic of the events; the breaking down of the space-time continuum, the multiplicity of the narrative subjects, the inconsistency of the plot, and so forth (2000, 195). In Xu’s view, the avant-garde writers attempt to release certain Cultural Revolution memories that cannot fit into the formerly established paradigm of narratives on the Cultural Revolution. Using unconventional storytelling techniques in an attempt to construct alternative “realities” of this history, these writers distinguish themselves as the ideologically subversive avant-gardes from their peers, who seek to provide a commonly shared “reality” of the Cultural Revolution (200-06).

Valuing Xu’s analysis of the Cultural Revolution narratives in the avant-garde fiction, I question his conclusion that the avant-garde writers use “narration of absurdity” to deconstruct established narratives that presented a collectively identified “reality” of the Cultural Revolution. To me, portraying the Cultural Revolution as an “absurd” period is confirming rather than challenging the conventional view of this history, since absurdity is already officially acknowledged and widely recognized as a condition of the Cultural Revolution itself. For this reason, I believe that the “narration of absurdity” characterizing the avant-garde fiction on the Cultural Revolution has more to do with stylistic modernism, a tendency to turn a political writing into a professional writing rather than a conscious gesture of ideological subversion. Since avant-garde fiction—the

works of a group of young writers who were engaged in language experimentations and formal innovations—arose in the latter part of the 1980s, when literature was undergoing a positional shift from the center to the periphery of social life, the avant-garde writers were likely to have a more realistic view of the limited social impact of their literary creations than their predecessors. Instead of sharing a collective agenda of counter-ideology, they were much more sensitive to individual style as a mark of self-distinction. Writing, in this respect, becomes a practice that produces specific subjectivities as opposed to a means of opening up new spaces for politico-ideological resistances.[5] Since the avant-garde writers were more concerned with "how to write" rather than "what to write," their alternative narratives on the Cultural Revolution can be understood better if viewed as the result of a liberal-style intervention rather than as a collective posture of rescuing the repressed memories from dominant narratives.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY: THE FUNCTION OF LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN THE LATE 1970S AND THE 1980S

Exploring how the Cultural Revolution is remembered in literary representations, Xu's conclusion that the function of avant-garde fiction is to co-create alternative realities of this period is debatable, yet understandable. Xu's narratology-oriented methodology confines him to analyze stories related to the Cultural Revolution from the perspective of "thematic type." By doing so, his analysis sidelines other significant distinctive factors such as language, form and style that diversify the Cultural Revolution narratives presented in the avant-garde

[5] For a detailed analysis of the development and characteristics of the avant-garde fiction in contemporary China, see Chen Xiaoming 1995, 33-63.

fiction. Despite this, Xu's work stands as the most comprehensive and in-depth study on the Cultural Revolution narratives in Chinese literature produced in the post-Mao era. Based on detailed textual analysis, Xu insightfully points out how certain literary narratives participate in the construction of particular collective memories of the Cultural Revolution.

According to Xu, the fiction under scrutiny represents four ways of remembering the Cultural Revolution: the Cultural Revolution as a tragedy of human nature in which a few bad guys sabotaged good people; the Cultural Revolution as a historical lesson in which valuable insights can be drawn from dreadful experiences; the Cultural Revolution as a terrible farce performed together by common folks; the Cultural Revolution as a testimony of the memories of specific generations of youth who made mistakes but refused to repent (226). These four modes of narrative are correspondingly affiliated with four kinds of historical collectives: innocent common people, introspective intellectuals, iconoclastic artists and generational cohorts such as the Red Guard and the educated youth (225). Through these four narrative prototypes, the Cultural Revolution has been remembered more as a collective horror than as a personal nightmare. And the Cultural Revolution stories have become testimonies of certain social groups who went through this movement, became direct eyewitnesses to this event, and claimed victimization from this historical catastrophe.

Xu's summary convincingly reveals how the remembrance of the Cultural Revolution in fiction was exploited in the cultural politic of the time. This cultural

politic was characterized by an emphasis on the therapeutic effect of literature, which contributed to the formation of the discursive practices that institutionalized a specific mode of "social remembering" while imposing particular forms of forgetting on individuals.[6] Besides novels, there were films, essays and memoirs also incorporated into the creation of collective memories to work through this historical trauma. For instance, Xie Jin's popular melodramatic films such as *Tianyunshan chuanqi* [The legend of Tianyun mountain, 1980], *Muma ren* [The herdsman, 1982], and *Furong zhen* [Hibiscus town, 1984] that take the Cultural Revolution as their backdrop provide emotional relief and moral edification rather than critical understanding of a trauma-ridden history (B. Wang 1999, 125; Pickowicz 1993, 313-24). Influential essay collections such as Ba Jin's *Suixiang lu* [Random reflections, 1984] unequivocally demonstrate how a writer re-entrusted with great social responsibility consciously endeavors to make sense of his horrific experiences during the Cultural Revolution via literary efforts.[7] In numerous memoirs published after the Cultural Revolution, mistreated party officials and their relatives, persecuted intellectuals, former Red Guards and sent-down youths also make personal memories and experiences reflections of a generational trauma or testimonies of a national tragedy or both.[8]

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[6] In his study of intellectual discourses in the 1990s, Ben Xu distinguishes "remembering" from "memorizing." Xu defines the former as "to seek not the most accurate but the most powerful interpretation of the past," and refers to the latter as "to discover historical past which exists as a socio-cultural artifact." Here, I borrow Xu's definition of remembering to identify an approach to institutionalize certain ideological discourses through literary narratives. See Xu Ben 1999, 105.

[7] For an analysis of Ba Jin's *Suixiang lu*, see Schwarcz 1996, 47.

[8] One of the most influential book series that includes many commemorative articles written by persecuted intellectuals, party officials or their relatives is *Lishi zai zheli chensi* [History is contemplating here, 1986]. Ed. Zhou Ming. 4 vols. Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1986.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION VIEWS, MEMORIES AND NARRATIVES FROM THE 1980S TO THE 1990S

Throughout the 1980s, the Cultural Revolution became "an omnipresent latent text" and "a signified associated with its continuously growing signifiers" (Dai Jinhua 1999, 42). At the same time, certain types of discussion on this history are constantly censored, making the Cultural Revolution an ideological minefield and a political taboo.[9] The numerous Cultural Revolution narratives produced in China in the 1980s were in essence incorporated into two major kinds of discourses.[10] The party-official discourses theorized the Cultural Revolution was "a mere political miscalculation of Mao or the conspiracy of the Gang of Four," which was "an unfortunate incident that became 'history' and must be buried in the past" (B. Xu 1999, 63-64). The intellectuals, on the other hand, portrayed the Cultural Revolution as an atrocity against humanity and introduced such notions as "humanism" and "socialist alienation," which formed the core of the pro-enlightenment and pro-democracy "high culture fever" in the 1980s (163).

In both cases, the Cultural Revolution was treated as something like a "holocaust"—at once a personal nightmare for individual citizens, a traumatic experience for the whole nation, and a tarnished page in the history of contemporary China. Due to the extraordinary ethical implications of this historical event, the search for a persuasive, rational explanation of what had

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[9] Retrospective views on the Cultural Revolution in the post-Mao era varied in both intensity and thrust. For a detailed discussion of the discursive continuity and change of such views, see Dittmer 1996-1997, 1-20.

[10] In my research, I refer to discourse as the knowledge, statements or literary texts, rooted in a specific cultural and rhetorical context, conveying meaning and ideology through the production, circulation and reception of them.

happened during those ten years of turmoil became not only a social obligation but also a moral and psychological necessity that deeply affected the development of art and literature in the post-Mao era. Therefore, we have witnessed the proliferation of officially endorsed memoirs and commemorative articles that exhibited narratives declaiming the rhetoric of letting history give valuable lessons to the future. By the same token, certain literary narratives on the Cultural Revolution had been incorporated into the official discourses to replace serious political inquiries with historical retrospections and cultural contemplations.

If in the 1980s the construction of the Cultural Revolution narratives was engaged with the deliberate silencing of particular images of this past directed by the party-state, in the 1990s, what featured prominently was "the unconscious social forgetting," a general loss of interest in a past that conveys an undesired or irrelevant self-image (Gambles 1995, 26). In a survey carried out by the popular *Beijing Youth* in 1993, many young people showed suspicion of the statement that great numbers of people suffered persecution during the Cultural Revolution. Many of them even thought that a small number of people had exaggerated the violent and chaotic reality of the Cultural Revolution to vent personal spite.[11]

In her study of the memoir literature on the Cultural Revolution, Vera Schwarcz warns us about the corrosive power of time which weakens the density of people's connection to the past, making them willing to accept incompleteness and live with erasure. As daughter of Holocaust survivors, Schwarcz is deeply troubled by the "opaqueness" that lingers three decades after the demise of the

[11] See *Beijing Youth*, 21 Dec. 1993.

Cultural Revolution, the lack of public commemoration organized by the government, and the indifferent attitude toward previous historical traumas developing in the market economy. Identifying the Cultural Revolution as a specific national heritage, Schwarcz calls upon "all who are willing to take history to heart" to hold remembrance of this past (1998, 53).

Schwarcz's claim is based on her concern about the official silencing on the Cultural Revolution, about a present without commemorative vigilance to invoke memories to resurrect a shared past. An acute and timely observation as she gives, the diversification of the Cultural Revolution views, memories and narratives in the 1990s China was not only caused by official intervention, but also related to the identity crisis arising in a society in which the drastic political and social changes rendered all previously held values questionable. If 1980s China was characterized by the uneasy coexistence of the state's agenda of modernization and the elite's utopian discourse of enlightenment, then, in the 1990s, China entered a new phase of development. The dissolution of the previous belief system led to the wrestling and negotiation among diverse and often conflicting views, values and positions. This, in turn, stimulated the exchange among various forms of capital in the production of social and cultural power.[12] Due to the disintegration of a dominant discourse imposed from either

[12] I will apply Bourdieu's definition of capital in the following part of my dissertation. Bourdieu believes that in the process of cultural practice, individuals or groups negotiate and exchange various forms of capital in order to gain value for themselves. To Bourdieu, capital has four basic forms. Each form can be "cashed in" for any other form. "Economic capital" refers to wealth and money; "cultural capital" refers to specialized knowledge of the artistic field and its history, as well as scholarly capital of a formal type (degree, award, etc.); "social capital" refers to the network of people that any individual knows and can rely on to support his or her actions; and "symbolic capital" means one's appearance, honor, prestige, body stance, manners, and speaking habits, etc. Through the exchange of various forms of capital, the exchange of cultural ideas can

the state or the intellectuals, alternative subjective identities that could not be subsumed under any formerly established historical and ideological collectives emerged and participated in the competition for naming a yet-to-be defined past as well as an ambiguous present.

What is striking about the "present" of the 1990s is its heterogeneity that complicates its relationship with its prehistory. After the Cultural Revolution, Chinese intellectuals labeled Deng's decade of "reforms and opening" as a "New Era" (*xin shiqi*) to underscore its discontinuity with the Mao's regime. In the early 1990s, nativist critics coined another term—"Post-New Era" (*hou xin shiqi*)—to identify the years after 1989 as a chronologically new epoch in a linearly progressive history (Dirlik and X. Zhang 2000, 433). Instead of designating a total rupture from their prehistory, the naming of the "New Era" and the "Post-New Era" implies that the configuration of China's present evokes a constantly adjusted relationship with its past. Yet, when China's relation to its immediate past is perceived as problematic, the remembrance of the past is not likely to take a common form. If the 1990s China showed a general disenchantment of the sacredness and authenticity of collective memory, it also witnessed a popular obsession with personal remembering. There emerged different types of nostalgia trends. Multiple memories of different time periods competed with each other and contributed to the formation of a specific group identity or individual subjectivity. The construction of the Cultural Revolution narratives, among other forms of

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diffuse from one area to another, potentially leading to changes in the societies engaged in exchange relations. See Bourdieu, 1993, 7.

historical remembering, becomes a means to forge specific individual or group identities.

Rather than establishing a coherent collective memory to form the base for historical reflection, the Cultural Revolution narratives produced in the literature of the 1990s often present contested memories and contrastive views on this history. Departing from thematic prototypes of trauma versus redemption that provide moralized verdicts and emotional therapy, certain Cultural Revolution stories portray this past as trauma-devoid or even memorable for various reasons. Not necessarily aiming at denying the disastrous nature of the Cultural Revolution as a collective trauma, the writers of relevant works shifted the focus of their literary representation of this history from objective reflection to individual validation. Instead of stating the non-traumatic nature of this history to all, they often made an effort to justify their own right to remember and understand this history differently. As a result, the politicization of memory so evident in the dominant narratives of blame in the 1980s has given way to a plethora of accounts that undermine the simplistic allocation of culpability and point instead to a growing recognition of the complexities and ambivalences inherent in this history.

"THE HISTORICAL METAMORPHOSIS OF MEMORY"

When alternative realties of the Cultural Revolution are presented in personal reflective memories, the "authenticity" of these stories and the "credibility" of the narrators are sometimes put into question. One might ask, are personal memories always reliable as historical? Is every individual qualified to be a credible narrator of history? More importantly, once the collective memory

of the Cultural Revolution is fractured and relativized in multiple personal memories, in what sense do memory and history interact to build a primary identity?

In his insightful essay "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieus de Mémoire*," Pierre Nora defines history and memory as both oppositional and compatible without suspending their "factual" aspects and sociopolitical connotations. Differentiating "real memory" as "lived reality" from textualized memory told or recorded in words, Nora points out that what we call "memory" today is already history since memory becomes deliberate and psychological when recollected as a duty, which is nearly opposite to the spontaneous "true memory" encoded in people's gestures, habits, self-knowledge of the body, the skills inherited from unspoken tradition, and so forth (1989, 13).

Nora's argument on the "psychologication of memory" challenges an optimistically held belief that the account of *personal* memory—the release, recovery and defense of a privileged memory by an individual or a minority group—is always a counterforce of institutional history. To Nora, memory is inevitably seized and transformed by history when it is narrated explicitly and materialized in written words or visual and audio archives while the "true memory" itself remains alive yet unsaid. In this sense, both history and memory become *a question of representation*. Nora argues that the dissolution of the distinction between history and memory implies "a decisive shift from the historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual, from the objective message to its subjective reception, from repetition to rememoration"

which entails a new economy of the identity of the self, the mechanics of memory, and the relevance of the past (15). Nevertheless, Nora believes that memory can still become a liberating force in constructing a personal or communal identity to redress the selective and reductive tendency of institutional history, and he calls this phenomenon the "historical metamorphosis of memory" (15).

Nora's analysis on the "historicization of memory" reveals the *interpretive* nature of both "lived memory" and the materialization of memory in the work of remembering. If memory provides individuals with an explicable account of the past, remembering seeks a powerful representation of this past in concrete forms. Based on this, Nora's discussion on the psychologization of contemporary memory emphasizes the significance of the *individual psychology of remembering* externalized in the forms of writing or speaking, rather than the collective mentality of commemoration realized in rituals and organized ceremonies. In the narration of personal memory, what has been discovered has less to do with an "actual" past that exists as a socio-cultural artifact than the emergence of a formerly subdued subjectivity. Writing thus becomes a process of self-redemption and a strategy of individual preservation. In this respect, the psychologization of memory not only makes history transform from the extraordinary testimony of the nation to the illustration of the average mentality of the people, it also enables every individual, even the most minor historical actor, to become a legitimized producer of history. When memory is experienced less collectively yet more psychologically, every individual is obligated to become memory-individuals in

order to protect their trappings of identity. In other words, *there is no bystander of history*. The modern "historical metamorphosis of memory" invites every interiorized memory to demand full recognition at present in relation to a blurred past (15).

Nora's discussion of history and memory shows the "constructed" nature of both without suspending the function of historical remembering as a powerful force of identity formation. Valuing Nora's insight, I view both history and memory as indispensable references upon which specific personal and community identities are built or revolted. As a result, rather than inquirying into the historicity of alternative visions of the Cultural Revolution recalled in contested memories of this history, I treat counternarratives in literature about this period as the dimensions of difference based on which certain literary producers claim their particular subjectivities, identities and status in a changing cultural field of the 1990s.

METHODOLOGY

Conventionally there are two ways of studying literature: the intrinsic and the extrinsic. The former takes literary texts as the subjects of inquiry and investigates the aesthetic and formalistic significance of literature. The later treats literature as social documents and examines the sociopolitical context within which literature is produced. In Western scholarship on contemporary Chinese literature, these two trends were both clearly distinguishable (Link 2000, 9-10). My study of literature on the Cultural Revolution aims at understanding how literary narratives on a particular history are used to meet the needs of the present.

More specifically, my dissertation studies not only the theme and content of particular literary works, but also the creation and reception of these writings. Since such research involves considerations of both textual and contextual factors, it is not enough to investigate literary works as ahistorical, self-sufficient texts. Nor am I able to reach my stated goal by viewing relevant writings merely as the reflections of some sort of determinant social structure within which they were produced.

For this reason, my study of literature on the Cultural Revolution goes beyond the boundary between the intrinsic and the extrinsic approach. While my research is based on textual analysis, it also takes into consideration certain contextual factors that contributed to the production and consumption of specific counternarratives. On the one hand, I explore how certain established narratives on the Cultural Revolution were confronted in those counternarratives, upon which a particular individual or group identity was forged. On the other hand, I examine a specific dimension of cultural practice, namely, the self-positioning of the writers, critics, publishers, and readers in order to understand the active roles they played in the production of relevant works.

Studying the actions and relations of people involved in the social practice of literature, my research makes reference to Pierre Bourdieu's cultural theory, more specifically, his discussion of art as cultural practice.[13] In his theoretical framework, Bourdieu refuses a charismatic theory of the isolated artist and resists the interpretation of pure disinterestedness on the part of both the public and the

[13] For an elaborate introduction of Bourdieu's cultural theory, see Bourdieu, 1993, 1-25.

artists. For him, the production of artistic work is a strategic action that involves literary producers such as writers, critics, publishers and audience members whose practices are always directed towards the maximizing of material or symbolic profits (1977, 183). Recognizing the active roles played by literary producers in the social production of literature, Bourdieu also points out that these "artistic mediators" cannot act as free-will agents, but are bound to act according to the rules inhabited in their "artistic habitus" (1993, 71).[14] In my own research, my application of Bourdieu's cultural theory mainly focuses on studying the rationales behind the activities of literary producers related to the production and consumption of specific works. By doing so, I examine how literary producers make use of a specific past to meet various individual needs and to serve particular social and cultural functions.

CHAPTERS

As my research deals with the transition of Cultural Revolution narratives in literature of the post-Mao era, I begin each chapter with a discussion of a particular thematic prototype that characterizes conventional Cultural Revolution narratives. Four prototypes are chosen, which respectively portray the Cultural Revolution as a cultural desert for the youth, an ascetic regime for sexual frustration, a disastrous period for coming-of-age adolescents, and a destructive force in mundane living. I then compare these four thematic prototypes with four types of counternarratives produced in the 1990s. In the latter, the Cultural

[14] Bourdieu defines habitus as "system of durable, transposable dispositions" (1977, 5). More specifically, it is a set of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions. The habitus produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generating principle (1993, 5).

Revolution is remembered as a period of self-learning, sexual indulgence, adolescent adventure, and ordinary life. Through the scrutiny of relevant literary texts that "detraumatize" the Cultural Revolution, I discuss how contextual factors contribute to the production of alternative narratives on this history.

The first chapter studies the narratives on the Cultural Revolution in the "scholarly essays" produced in the 1990s. As a newly emerging literary genre, the scholarly essay represented a strategy of elite self-positioning. Written by middle-aged scholars, the "scholarly essay" declaimed a specific identification that could distinguish their authors both from "pure" artists and from their "less-professional" peers. As well-established figures possessing consecrating powers in the academic field, the use of memories of the Cultural Revolution in their largely autobiographical essays became a strategy for elite grouping and accumulation of historical capital and social prestige. By analyzing the emergence of alternative images of the Red Guard and the educated youth in these essays, I explore the strategies taken by some intellectuals to cope with the dramatic marginalization of their social position.

The second chapter discusses the narratives that sexualize the experience of the Cultural Revolution as sensual and erotic. The representative works chosen here are Wang Xiaobo's two novellas: *Huangjin shidai* [The golden age, 1992] and *Geming shiqi de aiqing* [The love in the revolutionary era, 1992]. While sex and desire have become an important theme in fiction and film in the post-Mao era, Wang's narratives that make sexual indulgence the direct "consequence" of political education and ideological edification distinguish him from such famous

writers of the 1980s as Zhang Xianliang and Wang Anyi. If sexual representations of Zhang Xianliang and Wang Anyi established a thematic prototype that blames the Cultural Revolution as a period of sexual repression that must be condemned in order to move into a humanist future, Wang Xiaobo's writings complicate the Cultural Revolution experience by addressing the libidinous tension and sexual implication embedded in the "revolutionary" environment of asceticism and heroism. Exploring Wang's fictional eroticization of the Cultural Revolution, I also take issue with the media's construction of Wang Xiaobo as a cultural icon, which, in my view, reduced his complicated inquiry into the relationship between political power and the sexual dimension of human identity to a "liberal" proclamation of sexual and individual freedom.

The third chapter deals with the narratives in which the Cultural Revolution is nostalgically retrieved as a free and fun time for young children and adolescents. More specifically, this chapter discusses Wang Shuo's street-smart novella *Dongwu xiongmeng* [Vicious animals, 1991] and his most recent novel *Kanshangqu henmei* [Looking very beautiful, 1999]. Describing the lives of children and adolescents who enjoyed the privilege of playing in historical chaos, these two stories share many similarities in theme as well as plot. However, the two works received very different responses from their readers. This chapter tries to find an explanation for this curious phenomenon. Studying the evocations of specific personal memories bearing concrete material and historical referents, I discuss how "play" serves different functions in the identity formation of the underage in a specific historical period. Moreover, I study how the consumption

of specific generational memories affiliated with “play” works to define certain lifestyles and living philosophies as trendy, which serves the present need of social stratification.

The fourth chapter studies the ways through which a dramatic social and political turmoil such as the Cultural Revolution is “trivialized” in the stories of everyday life. I examine two influential novels by Yu Hua: *Huozhe* [To live, 1991] and *Xu Sanguan maixue ji* [Chronicle of a blood merchant, 1996]. Departing from his early avant-garde fiction in which the Cultural Revolution is metonymically represented in stories of death, torture and violence, Yu’s two novels in the 1990s are characterized by plain language and a realistic style, with the Cultural Revolution being portrayed as a common episode in the mundane lives of two families. I also discuss Wang Anyi’s two fictional works: *Wengongtuan* [Art troupe, 1997] and *Yinju de shidai* [The era of seclusion, 1998]. In both works, Wang describes the ordinary life experienced by the sent-down intellectuals, local artists, and educated youths during the Cultural Revolution. Emphasizing the significance of mundane survival, these works form a sharp contrast to Wang’s earlier fiction in which she portrayed the rustication years as a period of frustration and disorientation for the educated class.

As well-acclaimed writers, both Yu and Wang changed their strategies to represent the Cultural Revolution in their recent writings. In this chapter, I study how their works posit mundane survival as a counterforce to a violent history. Discussing the thematic transformation of their Cultural Revolution narratives, I

also investigate the significance of these transitions in the development of their writing careers.

Chapter One

Zhu Xueqin and Xu Youyu: Alternative Images of the Red Guard and the Educated Youth in the "Scholarly Essay"

CONTESTED MEMORIES CHALLENGING THE CULTURAL CONFORMITY OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

It has been a commonly accepted idea that during the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution, China was virtually a cultural desert. Many historical factors support this viewpoint, such as the campaign to destroy the "Four Olds" (old thinking, old tradition, old custom, old habit), the breakdown of the education system, the monopoly of cultural production by a small political clique, and the wide-scale persecution of intellectuals. Since the official cultural agendas excluded alternatives in terms of ideology and artistic approach, there was little room left for cultural diversity. As a result, the cultural climate during the Cultural Revolution is often described as "dull" and "monotonous," and it offered meager resources and limited possibilities for people to fulfill their intellectual curiosities or to meet their cultural needs.

Given these facts, the Chinese intelligentsia has been identified as the main victim of the Cultural Revolution. Although different views have been raised to negotiate with the claim of the general impoverishment of cultural life during this period, these views did not challenge the established narrative that this ten-year period was time "wasted" for China's cultural elites (M. Gao 1999, 319-23). In the literary field, the condemnation of the Cultural Revolution by

persecuted intellectuals has spawned an industry of memoirs. Several essay collections by an older generation of intellectuals on their experiences of the Cultural Revolution attracted great attention, caused a huge social impact, and have been studied thoroughly by Chinese and overseas scholars.[15]

Challenging a prevalent theme that portrays the Cultural Revolution as ten years of ideological and cultural conformity, some essays written by middle-aged Chinese scholars in the 1990s paint a striking picture of the Cultural Revolution as a liberated period for intellectual exploration. In their recollections, the Cultural Revolution not only provided an ideal environment for the development of grassroots cultural activities, it also facilitated the grouping of intellectual cohorts to form a domain of cultural production free from the direct control of the party-state. Nostalgically recalling their Cultural Revolution experience as an exciting mental journey of self-learning, the contributors of these essays are often well-known university professors or prominent scholars in research institutions of humanities and social sciences.

Because of people's differences in family background, social status, environment and personal experience, it is understandable that their memories of the Cultural Revolution can be very different. Moreover, since the Cultural Revolution itself was characterized by themes promoting contradictory cultural agendas, it left some space for the negotiations between various counterpoint

[15] In the post-Mao era, many prominent writers and scholars wrote memoirs and essays to recall their experiences during the Cultural Revolution. To name a few, Ding Ling's *Niupeng xiaopin* [Fragments about the cowshed, 1979]; Ba Jin's *Random Reflections* (1978-1986), Yang Jiang's *Ganxiao liuji* [A cadre school life: six chapters, 1981]; and Ji Xianlin's *Niupeng zayi* [Memoirs from the cowshed, 1998]. Many other essays and memoirs are included in *Lishi zai zheli chensi* [History is contemplating here, 1986]. Ed. Zhou Ming. 4 vols. Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1986.

values.[16] At the later stage of the Cultural Revolution, the failure of official ideology to absorb potentially subversive ideas led to the gradual disintegration of former social agencies of authority (state, work unit, school, parents, etc.). This situation was liberating to some young people in their search for alternative ways of self-realization beyond the institutional constraints. As a result, while the Cultural Revolution promoted a dominant discourse that constricted the collective domain of cultural production, at the grass-roots level this discourse was so fragmented that it left room for the emergence of underground cultures, and allowed competition among various value systems.

The aim of this chapter, however, is not to argue for the cultural variety of the Cultural Revolution. What attracted my attention are the contested memories on the Cultural Revolution experiences of former Red Guards and educated youths found in the "scholarly essay" (*xuezhe sanwen*), a newly consecrated sub-genre of literature in the 1990s. Examining the emergence of the "thinking-type" (s*ixiang xing*) Red Guards and the educated youths as "minjian thinkers" (*minjian sixiangzhe*) in some "scholarly essays,"[17] I study how personal memories of some middle-aged scholars were used to promote liberalism as an influential intellectual trend in contemporary China.

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[16] For instance, Lowell Dittmer argues that the Cultural Revolution is both anti-elite (for its agenda of getting rid of sybaritism, corruption and power-mongering) and anti-mass (for the violent factionalism it caused). See Dittmer 1996-1997, 19.

[17] Here, "minjian" is a technical term that is difficult to translate into English. Understood in the immediate context, "minjian" refers to a sphere of grass-roots cultural activities beyond the institutional control of the government and the academia.

THE NAMING OF THE "SCHOLARLY ESSAY" AND THE SELF-POSITIONING OF SCHOLARS

In order to understand the significance of alternative narratives on the Cultural Revolution in the "scholarly essays," it is necessary to study the naming and popularity of this literary genre in contemporary China. In the 1990s, the appearance of the "scholarly essay" caught a great deal of attention in the literary circle. Written by middle-aged, well-acclaimed scholars dominating the powers of consecration in the academic field, the "scholarly essays" are indicative of a strategy of self-positioning of some intellectuals. On the one hand, some scholars found a channel to get involved in public discussions when public issues are discussed from a personal perspective in an artistic form such as essay. On the other hand, playing double roles as scholar and essayist, these intellectuals expanded their narrative realms, speech genres and critical space. Occupying legitimized positions in both the academic sphere and literary domain empowered them as active cultural agents and broadened their influence in the cultural field.

Written by respected scholars, writings labeled as "scholarly essays" show more diversity than similarity in thematic and stylistic concerns. Despite this diversity, some distinguishable features characterizing these essays attract the attention of both publishers and literary critics and convince them to promote these writings as an independent literary genre. The publication of *Lengmo de zhengci* [The detached testimony] in 1998, a collection of scholarly essays as an independent volume in *Jiushi niandai wenxue shuxi* [Literature series of the 1990s], marked that this specific mode of writing finally received formal recognition by literary critics in mainstream academia.

In the literary history of modern China, it has been common for scholars to write non-academic articles in which they express their personal feelings or social concerns. However, their essays were never treated as an independent literary genre since there has always been a tendency to make a clear distinction between "creative writing" (*wenren zhiwen*) and "scholarly writing" (*xuezhe zhiwen*) (Hong Zicheng 1998, 1). Not only this, the naming of the "scholarly essay" needs specific justification since it is questionable to group certain writings together as a specific sub-genre of literature according to the *social role* played by the authors. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the writings labeled as "scholarly essays" hardly relate to each other in terms of content, language style, and narrative strategy. Well aware of all these problems, Hong Zicheng, an influential literary critic who served as the editor-in-chief of *The Detached Testimony*, chose to make an argument explaining how "scholarly" can be conceived as a criterion that regulates thematic, stylistic and formalist diversity.

To distinguish a group of essays written by scholars from other types of essays, Hong created a new category to group these writings together and made an effort to seek the links that might unite these works based on some shared traits. According to Hong, the writings labeled as "scholarly essays" bear two distinctive characteristics. First, these writings convey a "consciousness of problem" (*wenti yishi*) since they touch upon many significant social phenomena and topical issues of the era. Second, certain writings, including "cultural critiques" (*wenhua piping*), "academic jottings" (*xueshu suibi*), and "self-revelation" (*ziwo chenshu*) break the conventional imageries, sentiment, tone, format and reader's

expectation associated with essay writing in contemporary China because "scholars" rather than "writers" penned them. More specifically, the professional characters of the scholars make their essays read as more "detached," that is, more objective, composed, rational and profound than "literary essays," thus redressing a "sentimental" trend prevalent in contemporary essay writings. Based on these features, Hong argues that the "scholarly essays" deserve to be treated as an independent sub-genre of literature since they are writings that must be received, read and appreciated according to the social role and professional characters of their authors as acclaimed scholars (4-6). The naming of the "scholarly essays" implies that these authors constitute more than simply a chance, but meaningful, grouping that deserves to be studied "academically." Naming thus becomes a powerful discursive construct that grants the object named a convenient way to enter into the literary field and occupy a legitimized position within the hierarchy of cultural legitimacy.

THE ROLES PLAYED BY PUBLISHING INSTITUTIONS IN THE PROMOTION OF THE "SCHOLARY ESSAY"

Taking account of this fact, the writings classified as "scholarly essays" underwent a process of pre-selection through critical commentaries and bore certain supplementary marks of editors and publishers. It is necessary to discuss the role played by literary journals in promoting this specific literary genre in the changing cultural scene of the 1990s.

Here, two features are particularly noteworthy. First, scholarly essays appeared more regularly and occupied a more prominent position in some journals than others. Many of these journals such as *Dushu* [Reading], *Ershiyi*

shiji [Twenty-first century], *Suibi* [Jottings], and *Tianya* [The end of the world], are neither government-controlled nor purely commercialized, but literary journals run by professional publishers or newly founded academic journals receiving overseas funds. Their specific nature and regulating faculty enabled these journals to keep a relatively independent position free from the direct control of the state-oriented cultural administration and the tight grip of market principles guiding the production of popular culture. Yet, as cultural publications targeting a readership in the academic field and intellectual circle, these journals have to be very sensitive to both cutting-edge intellectual trends and changing market demands.

In the literary field of the 1990s, the most earnest contributors of "scholarly essays" to these journals were the scholars who entered college after the Cultural Revolution. Some of these scholars also received overseas education in the United States or Europe. Willing to absorb new trends of thinking and to adopt Western theories, these younger-generation scholars have relied on literary journals to establish their discursive base in their struggle for legitimized positions in the academic field. This phenomenon was intimately related to "the grouping of the intellectuals" (*zhishiren tuanhuo xianxiang*), a situation noticed and named by Liu Xiaofeng (1996, 201). In his discussion of the transition of intellectuals and development of the publishing enterprises after Mao's years, Liu highlights the phenomenon that certain intellectuals took specific journals as their base to form a cohort of peers who shared similar cultural agendas and academic interests. Following Liu's argument, we can see how the grouping of the

intellectuals in the 1990s was related to the dynamic change of the "rules of the game" in academia and characterized by the competition of the alternative principles of consecration.

Entering the 1990s, the structural transition of the political and cultural field triggered the redistribution of the cultural capital and the struggle for the right of cultural legitimacy. In the academic circle, these competitions were manifested as the tension between intellectuals and party ideology, the tensions within the intellectual group itself, the tensions between intellectuals in the cultural center (Beijing) and regional areas, and the tensions between intellectuals trained in China and their peers who received overseas education. In this process, publishing enterprises gradually became the battlefield in which the competitions of consecration crossed swords. Owing to the authoritative and relatively independent status of journals such as *Reading* and *Twenty-First Century*, which had been widely recognized in the universities and academic institutions, the writings published in these journals by certain scholars conversely increased their symbolic capital (honor, prestige, etc.) in academic circles. From the editor's perspective, keeping a close relationship with these scholars also guaranteed a reliable market for the journal, since these scholars were often the newcomers who initiated the necessary challenges that attracted the attention and activated the relational regulations in the literary field of restricted production.

By the same token, it is not surprising for us to find another striking phenomenon, that is, certain authors achieved a far more prominent position in

these journals compared with others.[18] Referring to *The Detached Testimony*, the collection of "scholarly essays" published in 1998, we find that many names appearing in this book were also commonly found in the journals mentioned above. This phenomenon transmits a meaningful message: only non-academic essays of certain younger scholars were identified as a specific literary genre and became the object of contemplation of literary critics. Published in respectable journals, these writings formed a discursive force that legitimizes the ideology and practice of their authors. The discursive power of the "scholarly essay" also heightened the symbolic status of the journals, which were seen as the supporters of a new literary genre.

THE "THINKING TYPE" RED GUARD AND THE EDUCATED YOUTH AS "MINJIAN THINKERS" IN THE "SCHOLARLY ESSAY"

As a literary phenomenon appearing at the end of the twentieth century, the popularity of the "scholarly essay" is related to the self-positioning of some scholars in response to the marginalization of the position of intellectuals in society. As academic professionals in their specialized fields, these scholars voiced their concerns about social issues in their essay writings. Consecrated by literary critics and promoted by professional publishers, the production of these essays contributed to the establishment of the narrative authority of their authors. The foregoing discussion lays the foundation for my examination of the

[18] Taking *Reading* as an example, according to its "comprehensive index" of 1997 and 1998, while most of the authors appeared in the journal only once, American-trained economist Wang Dingding and Qinghua University professor Ge Zhaoguang both have seven contributions respectively. The promotion of writings by specific scholars is especially obvious in the case of Chen Pingyuan, a leading scholar in the field of modern Chinese literature and the representative figure promoting the non-academic essay writings in the 1990s, who had 37 articles published in the journal by 1999.

emergence of alternative images of the Red Guard and the educated youth in some scholarly essays.

In the following part of this chapter, I study the "thinking-type" Red Guard and the educated youth as "minjian thinkers" in two scholars' essay writings. One of the authors, Zhu Xueqin, is a history professor at Shanghai University. The other author, Xu Youyu, is a senior researcher at the Institute of Philosophy, Chinese Academy of Social Science. It is necessary to point out that the Cultural Revolution narratives of these two scholars represent their particular understandings of this history. Identifying several features characterizing their essayistic recollections, I do not intend to use their writings to illuminate a general attitude toward the Cultural Revolution shared by the authors of the "scholarly essays," nor am I justifying the "authenticity" of their portrait of this history. Choosing relevant works by these two scholars as the object of my study is a result of my own interest in counternarratives on the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, I believe their essays deserve particular exploration in relation to the construction of liberalism as an influential intellectual discourse in China toward the end of the twentieth century. This can be seen when the two scholars dissociate themselves from established generational images of the Red Guard and the educated youth to establish a certain individuality that categorizes them as "minjian" cultural elites. In this respect, their Cultural Revolution narratives are exemplary texts that reflect the competition of various political and cultural agendas defining the dynamic of cultural politics in the 1990s.

THE LOST GENERATION: THE CONVENTIONAL IMAGE OF THE RED GUARD AND THE EDUCATED YOUTH

In literature of the post-Mao era, Cultural Revolution stories narrated from the perspectives of former Red Guard and educated youth establish a narrative prototype that portrays these young people as the very victims of this history. In his study, Xu Zidong finds that the message passed on from much Red Guard-educated youth literature can be summarized in a first-person statement: "I might be wrong, but I will never repent" (2000, 207). In different stories, "wrong" can express an emotion of being "betrayed" and "victimized," or bear the implication of being "sacrificed," which stresses a helpless feeling of lacking control over one's own life. Although in these works there has always been an excuse given to lift the burden of repentance, the Cultural Revolution experiences of the Red Guard and the educated youth were more often than not remembered as a process of costly growing up accompanied by disappointment, wrongdoings and sufferings in both the physical and psychological sense.

Constructing a collective "victim identity," the established narratives on the Cultural Revolution experiences of the Red Guard and the educated youth create a generational image of these young people at the cost of obscuring some very real differences in behavior and outlook among them. Some scholars have started questioning a simplified, collective portrait of the Red Guard and the educated youth (M. Gao 1999, 316; Wang Meng, Chen Jiangong, and Li Hui 1995, 74). In literature, alternative narratives also appeared in order to fragment

the established generational images of these two groups.[19] For instance, in some essays written by Zhu Xueqin and Xu Youyu, the authors refuse to claim victimization from this history. Rather than lamenting their loss of political innocence in the turbulence of the movement and regretting their lack of education, the authors describe how they enjoyed the excitement of self-motivated learning and became involved in the underground cultural activities.

FORMER "MINJIAN" CULTURAL ELITES, PRESENT-DAY LIBERAL INTELLECTUALS

Just as the majority of the authors of the "scholarly essays," Zhu and Xu are both middle-aged intellectuals who shared with their peers the similar generational experiences as former Red Guard and educated youth. However, the two belong to the fortunate few who had the opportunity to receive higher education after the Cultural Revolution, and later to do their research as visiting scholars in prestigious Western universities such as Oxford and Harvard. Besides their scholarly publications, the two are also known for their essay writings. In the 1990s, Zhu Xueqin was regarded as one of the forerunners who combined scholarly elaboration with essayistic embellishment. His reputation as a solid scholar and a stylistic essayist was established on two essay collections: *Sixiangshi shang de shizongzhe* [The people lost in the history of thinking, 1999] and *Shuzhai li de geming* [The revolution in the study, 1999], in which his Cultural Revolution experience is a favorite theme. Xu Youyu, whose specialization is modern Western philosophy, also published an essay collection

[19] In her research, Leung notices the emergence of multiple voices that question the conventional "victim" image of the Red Guard and the educated youth (2000, 28-9).

and several articles on the Cultural Revolution. His theoretical analysis and personal recollections of this ten-year history are mainly found in *Ziyou de yanshuo* [The free talk, 1999], in which his personal experiences are exhaustively retraced and recorded in detail.

In retrospection of the Cultural Revolution as acclaimed scholars in humanities, Zhu and Xu share with many others a critical attitude when they discuss the negative effects of this movement on Chinese society and people in general. Recollecting their own experiences, however, they distinguish themselves from their peers through an elitist consciousness transmitted in distinguishable narrative rhetoric. In their essays, the life experiences of being former Red Guard and educated youth, conventionally pictured as psychologically traumatic, physically demanding and mentally dull, were portrayed as particularly meaningful and rewarding in terms of knowledge accumulation, intellectual exploration and personal development. In this mode of narrative, a collective image labeling these generations of youth as the victims of this history is rebuffed and fragmented when specific individuals and groups of the Red Guard and the educated youth are described as independent thinkers who took responsibility for their own choice and struggled to change their fate despite environmental disadvantages.

Instead of presenting a self-image of being “revolutionary vanguards” who wholeheartedly yet blind-mindedly followed the “highest command” of Mao, Zhu and Xu identify themselves with a group of “thinking-type” Red Guards who developed a suspicious attitude toward the agenda of the Cultural Revolution

during the movement. Rather than unconditionally accepting the official propaganda, they started to study the political situation and predict the future developments of the movement by themselves (Xu 1999, 447-53; Zhu 1995, 55). Moreover, both authors have a fond memory of the Cultural Revolution for their communication with specific groups of educated youth. Relocated to the countryside, these young people lived a life which was very different from that of those usually labeled as social "subalterns." As a group of self-motivated learners, these educated youths constituted some "minjian villages of thinking" (*minjian sixiang cunluo*) (Zhu 1995, 55). By organizing cultural salons, literature clubs, study groups and cohort publications, they were actively involved in all kinds of intellectual explorations, informed discussions and reasoned arguments. Traveling from one place to another, they not only exchanged ideas, but also circulated among themselves the cohort newspaper, journals and the hand-copies of underground literature as well as foreign books translated into Chinese for internal circulation (Xu 1999, 128). In short, in the recollections of Xu and Zhu, certain individuals and groups of the Red Guard and the educated youth were portrayed as "minjian" cultural elites who lived in material poverty yet empowered themselves in artistic creation, intellectual pursuit and cultural communication. Related with each other through mutual identification that provided an environment of free speech and equal participation, these young people created a relatively autonomous space for grassroots cultural activities.

From these narratives, we can discern a mode of nostalgia toward a lost cultural paradise—a "minjian sphere of thinking" (*minjian sixiang jie)*—formed

by “minjian” cultural elites identified as “thinking-type” Red Guards and the educated youths as “minjian thinkers.” The existence of such a cultural sphere contributed to the formation of a public culture free from the control of the state, scholarly discipline and the cultural market. Compared with contemporary intellectuals who work in academic institutions, the impulsive artistic creation and the spontaneous pursuit of knowledge of these “minjian thinkers” are described as “purer” and more independent since they are not aimed at gaining any official endorsement, career development or material gain (Zhu 1995, 56).

THE “MINJIAN” CULTURAL ELITES AS THE PRIVELIGED FEW

If the Cultural Revolution memories by Zhu and Xu redress a conventional generational image of the Red Guards and the educated youths as the helpless victims of this history, this is because they were among the privileged few who were able to receive a higher level of formal schooling in their formative years than their peers. Both Zhu and Xu were born into intellectual families and enrolled in “elite” (*zhongdian*) middle schools as teenagers.[20] The influences of their families in terms of knowledge pursuit and art appreciation nurtured a “superiority complex” associated with them from an early age. At school, their outstanding academic performances made them the center of attention and the self-identified star students among their peers (Xu 1999, 5-6; Zhu 1998, 171). With the development of the Cultural Revolution, Zhu and Xu were sent to the countryside along with millions of their peers. However, they both had opportunities to come back to the cities in 1972 to work in state-owned factories.

[20] Zhu entered a district-level elite middle school in 1966. Xu graduated from high school in 1966. See Zhu 1988, 8; Xu 1999, 123.

With a decent job and a relatively stable income, the two were able to follow their plans of self-learning at the later stage of the Cultural Revolution, which enabled them to pass the College Entrance Exam in 1977. As a result, the Cultural Revolution experiences of Zhu and Xu were much more rewarding in terms of knowledge accumulation and intellectual exploration than were the experiences of many of their peers who were deprived of any chance of learning.

Investigated in the context of their production, narratives retracing a lost "minjian cultural sphere" represent more than a gesture of personal reminiscence. Taking into consideration the specific theoretical and cultural stance held by these two scholars, we can discern how personal memories could be used as historical capital legitimizing certain intellectual discourses. In the cultural field of the late 1990s, Xu and Zhu were regarded as the leading figures of "liberal" intellectuals in China. Representing an influential intellectual wave, Chinese liberals inherit a Western cultural tradition, more specifically, the classical liberalism of Britian and America characterized by positivism and rationalism. This trend of liberalism identifies individual autonomy as a core facet of a modern subject. Moreover, it holds faith in the significance of civil society to realize modernity based on Western bourgeoisie models (Chen Jianhua 1998, 117).

A thorough discussion of this liberal tradition is beyond the scope of my study. What I intend to point out is how a present-day discursive elaboration of these liberal values in China is supported by "historical facts" presented in essayistic narratives of some scholars. In the essays by Zhu and Xu, for instance, the importance of individual autonomy is emphasized as the key characteristic of

the “minjian thinkers,” who were able to act and think independently in a confined society, owing to the liberal values they cherished, processed, insisted and defended. In this sense, a nostalgic recollection of their experiences as “minjian” cultural elites becomes a corroboration of their current cultural ideal as liberal intellectuals in the 1990s.

Besides portraying alternative images of the Red Guard and the educated youth as “minjian” cultural elites, the essays by Zhu and Xu also verify the existence of an autonomous sphere of cultural production: a “minjian cultural sphere” that contains a formal configuration of a modern public sphere in both urban and rural China during the Cultural Revolution. The definition of “public sphere” has registered a good deal of terminological confusion in China recently. Coined by Habermas to refer to a historically, class and culturally specific phenomenon of eighteenth-century Europe (1989, 87), this term causes controversy when scholars apply it to analyze specific sociohistorical situations in China. Scholars such as William T. Rowe and Richard Madsen have criticized a generalized, simplistic usage of Habermas’s “public sphere” to analyze China’s case (Rowe 1990, 309; Madsen 1993, 183-84). Nevertheless, they also point out that this concept could be applied in constructive ways to study certain social and cultural activities in modern China (Rowe 318-26; Madsen 184).

In his study of contemporary Chinese culture, Ben Xu defines “public sphere” as a “context of living,” “a realm that resists both assimilation to the sphere of economic interests and the fully ritualized logics of existing institutionalized politics (the party system, the state)” (1999, 136). Borrowing

Xu's definition, we can identify the "minjian cultural sphere" in the Cultural Revolution described in Xu's and Zhu's essays as a narrative construction of a particular "public sphere." Existing in a specific sociopolitical context, this "public sphere" forms a realm of freedom devoted to artistic creation, intellectual exploration and public discussion that is neither restrained by state power, nor driven by economic concerns. Portrayed as independent social and cultural subjects rather than passive victims of their environment, the "minjian thinkers" bear representative features characterizing modern liberal intellectuals as autonomous individuals, responsible members of society and active critics of contemporary culture, whose associational life was particularly important since it produced socially engaged discourses committed to public issues and to the defense of its own autonomy.

Found in a literary sub-genre called "scholarly essay," which is viewed as more "objective" and "rational" in terms of its content than other forms of essay writings, the personal memories of scholars like Xu and Zhu of their Cultural Revolution experiences can be conveniently converted into historical capital to remap the past in specific discursive constructions of the present. Resonating with Zhu Xueqin's recollection, scholar Ding Dong argues that the "minjian thinkers" in the Cultural Revolution denote "a missing link in contemporary history of thinking" (1995, 91). To Ding Dong, the excavation of the "minjian" resources of thinking is of particular importance since "of all the ages, the majority of those refreshing and lively ideas were generated from the "minjian" sphere. Few of them were created in palace and temple" (92). Here, the promotion of the

significance of a "minjian sphere of thinking" participates in the construction of a contemporary intellectual discourse that encourages independent scholarship and "liberal" cultural critiques in a "minjian sphere."[21] Such a promotion can be found in several articles discussing the changing social roles played by intellectuals, in which a relatively autonomous, idealized "minjian sphere of discourse" is proposed as a niche in which intellectuals conduct socially engaged cultural critiques.[22]

If the "minjian sphere of thinking" is nostalgically retraced in the "scholarly essays" as an ideal yet lost "public sphere," the "autonomous" image of this public sphere serves a particular function in the discursive construction of liberalism in the 1990s. Pondering the significance of the "underground cultural production" during the Cultural Revolution, scholar Yang Dongping identifies the grass-roots cultural activities of some educated youths at the later stage of the movement as the origin of the pro-enlightenment, pro-democracy cultural discourses of the 1980s (1995, 417). From his description, we can discern an effort to create a genealogical link between the "minjian thinkers" in the Cultural Revolution, the enlightened intellectual elites in the 1980s, and the professional scholars in the 1990s.

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[21] The endorsement of the value of traditional private academies of classical learning by some scholars can be seen as an example of this mode of discursive construction. See Chen Pingyuan, 1998.

[22] Shanghai scholar Chen Sihe first summarizes various strategies of self-positioning of Chinese intellectuals through their identification with "temple and palace" (*miaotang*, referring political authority), "square" (*guangchang*, referring to cultural enlightenment or revolutionary propaganda) and "minjian sphere" (*minjian*, referring to a niche of a relatively independent, liberal sphere of cultural production). See Chen 1997, 169-81.

This genealogy is certainly "imagined" because in reality the transition from "minjian thinkers" to "professional scholars" is more a conscious self-positioning related to a process of chance taking and decision making than a consequential result of personal career development. As it has been shown in Zhu's essay, many of the "minjian thinkers" either did not or could not choose to pursue an academic career after the Cultural Revolution. Among those who entered academia, only some of them established themselves as acclaimed scholars, and even fewer participated in the promotion of "pure scholarship" and liberalism in the 1990s. In this respect, Yang Dongping's genealogical retracing of the self-positioning of Chinese cultural elites corresponds to a specific cultural situation: under the impact of commercialization and the political disillusion with democracy, some scholars in the 1990s tried to justify their strategy of taking a roundabout route for producing critical cultural criticism by addressing a prehistory when they were actively involved in the creation of "underground" cultural activities in a specific "public sphere."

When a specific mediative group—the elite intellectuals in the 1980s—relates the "minjian thinkers" in the Cultural Revolution to the "professionalistic scholars" in the 1990s, this affiliation is particularly meaningful. Making the underground cultural activities during the Cultural Revolution the cultural and spiritual "origins" of the "high cultural fever" in the 1980s, the "unofficial" nature of a "minjian cultural sphere" is softened, which endows the "minjian" thinkers a recognizable position in contemporary cultural history. Moreover, the significance of the existence of a "minjian cultural sphere" is further emphasized and

tentatively legitimized when the professionalistic and liberal scholars identified themselves as the surviving "spiritual" descendants of the "minjian thinkers," who inspired them to pursue an academic career with an independent spirit and a non-profit attitude.

Given the fact that public discussion is still largely restrained by state power in contemporary China, some intellectual elites in the 1990s tried to legitimize a critical circumstance for them to relate to one another in order to compose an identifiable association for the creation of a distinguishable subjective identity of liberal intellectuals as "autonomous" cultural agents. In this respect, the literary creation of the "thinking-type" Red Guards and the educated youths as "minjian thinkers" participated in the discursive construct of a "public sphere," where the discussion of public issues is combined with the "ultra-professional" and "non-academic" essay writings of some scholars.

FROM PERSONAL MEMORY TO GENERATIONAL EXPERIENCE

If the "minjian" cultural elites and the "minjian sphere of thinking" described in the "scholarly essays" are regarded as the products of a special historical period, a reconstruction of the Cultural Revolution as a period of self-learning leading to the prosperity of grass-roots cultural activities serves particular social and cultural functions in the cultural context of the 1990s. On the one hand, the elitist consciousness transmitted in these essays promotes values such as a "non-profit" attitude toward artistic creation and academic research, which aims to redress certain tendencies such as the "vulgarization" of culture, the commercialization of art and literature and the degradation of academic standards.

On the other hand, proposing the existence of a "minjian cultural sphere" in the past, some liberal intellectuals argue the necessity, significance, and legitimacy of the formation of a civil society as a force of social intervention in their attempt to regain a cultural niche in which to construct socially and politically engaged cultural critiques.

Nevertheless, problems arise when alternative historical memories are incorporated into a specific discursive construction to promote an elitist consciousness associated with certain liberal values as a new generational trademark. It certainly takes specific qualities to foster an elitist identity in a disadvantaged environment. According to Zhu and Xu, being a "minjian thinker" during the Cultural Revolution requires distinguished personal characters such as courage, curiosity, intelligence, self-discipline, a critical spirit, an open mind, an independent mentality, and, in many cases, "a superiority complex" established on a privileged family or educational background. Reading relevant essays, I have no doubt that "minjian thinkers" constituted a minority of their generation. For instance, Zhu Xueqin traces the genealogy of "minjian thinkers" in his famous essay *Sixiang shi shang de shizongzhe* [The people lost in the history of thinking, 1995] as follows:

> The majority of you graduated from elite middle schools. At that time, the nurturing (one obtained) from a good middle school was much more than (one can receive) from a graduate school nowadays. From then on, you were more interested in spiritual issues than daily events. Even in the fever of 1968, when other people held little red books and green cane caps in their hands, you had Kant and Belinsky in yours. In that year you were involved in the discussion of ideas. The discussion continued to reach farms and collective units (you were relocated to). You left the cities voluntarily, not by force, so (you) would not say that this was a "scar,"

> that was a "period idled away"…When the college entrance examination was reinstated, most of you chose the colleges of arts… (57, my own translation)[23]

This portrayal clearly distinguishes a group of youths who had a more privileged educational background than most of its peers. Although this is a strictly pre-selected and highly exclusive social group, Zhu goes on to give these fortunate few a generational label: "the people of the (19)68" (*68nian ren*) (61). In Zhu's article, this naming is not an incidental occurrence. If the year of 1967 marks a transitional point of the Red Guard movement which led to the disintegration and regrouping of the youths involved (Yang Dongping 1995, 416), Zhu singles out the year of 1968 as a starting point that represents the "spiritual awakening" of "our" generation (58). Attributing his academic achievements to the inspirations he received from "the people of 19(68)," Zhu nostalgically posts a notice to look for his former intellectual cohorts:

> How about later? (Were you) consumed by your specialty? Taxed by scholarly honor and official rank? Or "preserved in salt" on a particular level of a bookshelf by a professional title?……You have learned how to play with theories, yet you might have forgotten the real problems, let alone courage. Having obtained social status, you should not lose yourself. The theories in the colleges are not used for the exchange of degrees. That means a chance to think and a right to speak given to you particularly at the expense of the sacrifice of hundreds of your peers (57).

Disappointed by former peers who are doing academic research yet have lost the "purity" in terms of their motivation, Zhu also laments the living condition of the majority of former "minjian thinkers" who have become petty officials and lowly paid employees preoccupied with using their energy to obtain

[23] The literary texts quoted in this dissertation are all my own translations.

practical benefits. Realizing the impossibility of rallying with his former spiritual cohorts, Zhu eventually announces “the death of the spiritual life of the people of (19)68” (61). In this sense, the retracing of the living history of former “minjian thinkers” in Zhu’s essay turns out to be a eulogy given to the present in the name of mourning the past. This is an unsatisfactory present time that is devaluing the significance of intellectuals, vulgarizing the purpose of doing academic research, and leading people away from spiritual concern to pursue material gain.

In the late 1990s, similar critical views can be found in intellectual discussions that regret the loss of a “humanistic spirit” (*renwen jingshen*) in the humanities and cultural fields. What distinguishes Zhu’s view from that of the others is his strong sense of elitism, which leads him to generalize specific life trajectories of young people in minorities into generational experiences. In this respect, Zhu’s naming of “the people of (19)68” silences the voice of many peers who belong to the same age group yet do not share similar experiences or value judgments with Zhu and his spiritual cohorts. Speaking on behalf of his “generation,” yet apparently promoting the socio-cultural significance of a minority, Zhu’s lamentation of the “people lost in the history of thinking” is a heroic yet passive gesture of defense. This can be seen clearly when Zhu announces “the death of the spiritual life of the people of (19)68” (61). Refusing to accept the disintegration and regrouping of “his generation” as a natural and inevitable phenomenon, Zhu’s essay on the lost “minjian thinkers” releases his spiritual cohorts from historical memory only to seal them up again in an irretrievable past. As a result, what we get from his remembering is less the

evocation of a living past, but more a denial of the present that keeps its cultural causes unfulfilled in the critical view of intellectual elites.

Such an elitist consciousness can also be found in Xu's essays retracing his self-learning experience during the Cultural Revolution. In Xu's words, the extensive self-learning in the political chaos not only enabled him to enjoy a sense of superiority when compared with his revolutionary fellows (1999, 62), but also created a "spiritual archive" for him in which the "suffering and beauty" of "our generation" became objects of philosophical contemplation and aesthetic appreciation (1998, 456). As a personal choice, the elitist stance of the two authors is understandable and worthy of respect. Nevertheless, by turning personal memories into general experiences, by identifying specific cultural cohorts as the representatives of "our" generation, their alternative narratives on the Cultural Revolution mandate a discursive regime to suppress difference and diversity, which inevitably violates the liberal values (free choice, individual autonomy, etc.) promoted by the scholars themselves.

THE ROLE OF THE PUBLISHER

If the alternative narratives on the Cultural Revolution by Zhu and Xu resonate their present cultural stance as liberal intellectuals, these writings are incorporated into a discursive construction to promote certain "orthodox ideas" in the competition of market share. In 1999, Zhu's *The Revolution in the Study* and Xu's *The Free Talk* were both included in a series of books called "Intellectual Literary Archives of the Grassland Tribe" (*Caoyuan buluo zhishifenzi wencun*). He Xiongfei, the editor-in-chief of this book series, is an independent publisher

who made his name in the mid-1990s by organizing the publication of "Black Horse Series of Books" (*Heima wencong*), in which essays by unknown or lesser-recognized authors—many of them graduate students and young scholars—were successfully marketed. The success of the "Black Horse" series is mainly due to He's strategic promotion of his authors as the newcomers: the individualized, undisciplined, unorthodox and talented "black horses" rushing onto the literary scene. Providing these young authors a chance to make a scene in the literary circle, He Xiongfei calls himself "the chief of the grassland tribe" to identify with his somewhat different and "wild" "tribes people."

After the debut of the "Black Horse Series," He Xiongfei organizes the publication of "Intellectual Archives" as a prelude, as he indicates, to the "grassland tribe" to "reach a new realm" in the new century (1999, 410). In *bianhou xuyu* [The editor's note], He explains that the new series aims to promote writings by first-class scholars and thinkers in China in which a beautiful style of writing is combined with profound thinking, which reflects the independence and the critical spirit of the authors. Admitting that the publication of this book series is a business activity, He justifies his motivation of promoting these writings as follows:

> The scholars are shy and do not want to show off themselves; this is understandable. To a publisher, however, isn't it a tragedy that a first-class work only has two or three thousand readers? Why shouldn't we find true appreciators and market share for real thinkers in a big way? What harm can it do to make 100,000 readers read the selected works by Qian Liqun, Zhu Xueqin, Qin Hui and Xu Youyu?
>
> If orthodox ideas are not promoted, feigned ideas wearing a "scholarly" coat and issues in a horrible mess will spread. This is a shame to a

> publisher, a blasphemy to the thinkers, and a big crime committed against the readers (410-11).

In these words, He labels the writings by certain scholars as the "orthodox ideas" waiting to be recognized by "true appreciators." The problem here is not whether "orthodox ideas" can attract a wide readership. Rather, the problem lies in the very cultural and business practice that promotes certain thinking as "orthodoxy" to fight against "feigned ideas" and other "messy issues." In the case of Zhu and Xu, when their defense of liberal values, manifested in their essayist recollection of specific Cultural Revolution experiences, is promoted as the "orthodoxy thinking," their unconventional description of this history narrated from personal perspectives faces the danger of becoming a dominant discourse canceling out other intellectual choices, or, even worse, to become mainstream and used to produce brand name cultural products undermining the original critical thrusts of their writings.

CONCLUSION

In the cultural context of the 1990s, while some Chinese intellectuals committed themselves to professional academic research, they expressed their social concerns in their non-professional writings labeled as "scholarly essays" to participate in the shaping of public opinions. The thematic and stylistic diversity of these writings indicates different choices made and various beliefs held by these intellectuals. Among these authors, many emphasized the significance of a "minjian cultural sphere" as an ideal cultural and discursive space for intellectuals to create socially engaged cultural critiques.

The various definitions of “minjian” in the 1990s registered different understandings of this term among Chinese intellectuals. Three different approaches recapitulate the general trend. One opinion proposes “minjian” as a cultural sphere existing outside of the mainstream culture. For instance, Chen Sihe defines “minjian” in twentieth-century China as a hybrid coexistence of dispersed traditional culture, commercialized urban popular culture, and folk culture (1997a, 171-172). This definition of “minjian” is somewhat ambiguous since the terms such as “traditional culture,” “urban popular culture” and “folk culture” are in need of specific clarification themselves.

Compared with Chen Sihe, “minjian” in Chen Pingyuan’s view has a concrete historical reference. To him, the concept of “minjian” is developed from an ancient tradition of “private scholarship” as an opposition to “official scholarship.” Two features characterize such a tradition: a self-governed education system independent of state-controlled cultural institutions, and an academic tradition emphasizing the importance of “free thinking,” “independent spirit” and social engagement based on Confucian idea of moral self-cultivation (1998, 83-109). In this respect, “minjian” provides a niche for intellectuals to combine their elite stance of academic professionalization with their social roles as responsible members of society. Inspired by this “minjian” tradition, Chen suggests a cautious distinction between academic research and public discussion, and argues the value and feasibility of doing pure scholarship with a “world mind” as an ideal strategy for self-positioning of Chinese intellectual elites in the 1990s (1993, 76).

Diverging in specific conceptualization, Chen Sihe and Chen Pingyuan agree with each other that the idea of "minjian" is a derivation of Chinese cultural tradition. In contrast to this, another understanding of "minjian" represents an attempt to accommodate specific historical phenomena and social realities in China with the Western concept of "civil society." This can be seen in some scholarly works arguing the existence and the development of various forms of "civil society" in China, in which the associational activities and public discussions in Republican and contemporary China are studied based on modified definitions of "civil society" and "public sphere" (Duara, 1995; B. Xu, 1999).

In the cultural context of the late 1990s, with the gradual retreat of conservatism and radicalism from the central stage of public discussion, liberalism as an influential intellectual wave caught great attention and was actively engaged in the competition of discursive power. In this process, liberal intellectuals became the major force promoting the significance of "civil society." Here, what are noteworthy are not only their theoretical elaborations of a specific Western liberal tradition, but also their historical narratives that present the existence of a "minjian sphere of thinking"—a specific manifestation of "civil society"—as a historical "reality" in China during the Cultural Revolution.

Seen from this perspective, the appearance of "minjian" cultural elites and a "minjian sphere of thinking" in alternative Cultural Revolution narratives corresponds to a strategy of intellectual self-positioning. In the case of Zhu and Xu, their beliefs in liberal values such as political freedom, individual autonomy, positive rationalism and public discussion of social affairs based on equal

participation were all weaved into their nostalgic recollections of a particular past. This specific mode of narrative was further incorporated into the discursive construction of contemporary history of thinking and the spiritual genealogy of contemporary intellectual elites, through which a formerly repressed liberal tradition is traced, a forgotten “civil society” is rediscovered, and an emerging and formative “public sphere” demands formal identification.

Chapter Two

Wang Xiaobo: The Double Temptation of Revolution and Sexual Lure

WANG XIAOBO: THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION AS AN ERA OF SEXUAL INDULGLENCE

In post-Mao China, the appearance of sexual themes and images in art and literature is regarded as a cultural practice through which intellectuals displace socialist cultural theory. For instance, sexual representations in literature have been viewed as a discursive construction to recap the past in order to move into the future. Wendy Larson identifies two tendencies characterizing this method. The first treats the past as an era of sexual repression that must be overcome for the sake of the healthy development of the individual and society. The second represents past revolutionary ideology as sensual, erotic, and interesting as revolutionary eroticism (1999, 423). Larson correctly points out that the first approach—the condemnation of the Cultural Revolution as an ascetic society—is the most common narrative paradigm established. In this mode of narrative, the past can only be recouped when a main character in fiction challenges his or her boundaries and sociopolitical restraints through a liberated sexuality. Discussing the second approach, Larson identifies several cultural phenomena such as the popularity of songs of the Cultural Revolution, the appearance of Mao's image as a protective icon, the emergence of films and stories that describe the Cultural Revolution as a liberated time, and so forth. To Larson, these cultural products

"eroticize" the Cultural Revolution and Maoist ideology, making cultural Maoism a resistance to political Maoism. In both cases, sexuality is represented as an instinctual passion of the individual to fight overt social and ideological conformity. Consequently, Larson treats the "discursive explosion" of sexually explicit novels, films, and images in China in the 1990s as a "sexual revolution in representation" which builds "productive links between contemporary modernity, the West (particularly the Unites States), and sexual expression" (433).

Reading the sexual representation in contemporary Chinese art and literature as a discursive repercussion of Western modernity, Larson bases her discussion on cultural theories of human identity and sexuality developed in the West. Tracing the twentieth-century Western debate over human sexuality, Larson identifies a liberal, "enlightened" view of sexuality that conceptualizes sexual revolution as a direct challenge to the capitalist state (428). Within this context, the promotion of sexual pleasure becomes the basis of all anti-totalitarian freedom. Relying on this understanding of sexuality, Larson finds two approaches of representation that put the Cultural Revolution and sexuality together, which are seemly opposite, yet both give primacy to erotic expression as a force of individual and social liberation.[24]

Starting from Larson's discussion, I propose that the sexual expression in Wang Xiaobo's two novellas on the Cultural Revolution as are narrative alternations to both approaches noted by Larson, since Wang's works explore the complicated relationship between sexuality and Mao's ideology from alternative

[24] Larson summarizes various forms of sexual representation "as the opposite of the repression of the Mao era, as postrevolutionary cynicism, as a thirst for knowledge once unavailable, and as a primal urge that was forced into the channel of revolutionary" (432).

perspectives. In the 1990s, Wang Xiaobo's works caused controversy for their explicit descriptions of sexual experiences such as liaison, orgasm, and perversion. In contrast with a received pattern of narrative that represents this history as sexually repressive, Wang Xiaobo fascinates Chinese readers with his stories in which his protagonists enjoyed sexual indulgence during this period. At the same time, Wang's writings do not always celebrate sexual pleasure as a liberating force to an individual in the formation of his or her subjectivity. Exploring how Wang's works address the complex relationships between revolution ideology, sexuality and human identity, I then take issue with the "Wang Xiaobo phenomenon" to study how Wang's writings were appropriated in the media's construction to legitimize certain value judgments, justify a particular cultural stance, and make social distinctions in 1990s China.

THE LITERARY MANIFESTATION OF SEXUALITY IN THE POST-MAO CHINA: THE CASE OF ZHANG XIANLIANG AND WANG ANYI

After the Cultural Revolution, many Chinese writers touched upon the taboo topic of sexuality in their writings. An older generation of writers such as Lin Jinlan and Wang Meng, and younger authors such as Zhang Xianliang, Wang Anyi, Jia Pingwa, Mo Yan, Liu Heng, Yu Hua, Su Tong, Tie Ning, Chen Ran, and Lin Bai, inquire into the subject matter of sex and desire from various critical viewpoints and gender perspectives. In my study, I choose exemplary writings from Zhang Xianliang and Wang Anyi rather than taking a comprehensive survey of the changing profile of sexual representation in contemporary Chinese literature. This choice is based on two considerations. First, the focus of my study is how sexuality is depicted in the Cultural Revolution narratives rather than the

literary manifestation of desire in general. Zhang and Wang are the two representative writers who took human sexuality as a central theme in their writings in which the Cultural Revolution is made or implicated as a definite reference of the stories.[25] Second, diverging in how desire is gendered and represented in relation to politics, Zhang and Wang share a common gesture in using their sexual expression to redress an ascetic and repressive past. By comparison, Wang Xiaobo's Cultural Revolution stories in the 1990s emerged as a narrative alternation for their exploration of the erotic aspect of Maoist ideology.

In the post-Mao era, Zhang Xianliang is the first Chinese writer who addresses sexuality directly in his fictional writing. His famous "Love Trilogy" explores the effect of political persecution on intellectual identity and male sexuality. In *Lühua shu* [Mimosa, 1985], the hero receives sympathy, love and material help from a resourceful and illiterate local woman, yet he cannot repay her since he is transferred away and isolated under political pressure. In *Xiguan siwang* [Used to dying, 1989], the hero's recollection of his sexual indulgence in the United States in the 1980s is mingled with his reflection of his near-death experience in the labor camp. In his most controversial and influential work *Nanren de yiban shi nűren* [Half of man is woman, 1985], Zhang's direct description of sexual dysfunction suffered by a persecuted male intellectual

[25] In the post-Mao period, there are various approaches to represent sexuality in relation to historical memories. In some works by avant-garde writers such as Su Tong and Yu Hua, eroticism represents a turning away from the present when they set stories in a remote, undefined time frame without concrete historical reference. Some other writers like Wang Shuo, Wei Hui and Mian Mian saturate their characters with desire and make them live exclusively in the present without the emotional baggage of the past. These approaches will not be discussed in detail since they are not directly related to my topic.

breaks a thematic taboo in literature. This novella associates sex with politics in such a degree that the hero, who loses his sexual ability due to the long-term political persecution, finally regains his masculine power after a revolutionary act—a night of fighting a flood.

If Zhang Xianliang develops a theme that Chinese intellectuals have been psychologically emasculated as a result of political persecution, Wang Anyi explores human sexuality from a feminist perspective in her "Love Trilogy." The first part of the trilogy, *Huangshan zhi lian* [Love on a barren mountain, 1986], describes the extramarital affair of a man and a woman who commit suicide together under family and social pressures. *Xiaocheng zhi lian* [Love in a small town, 1986] draws a portrait of an affair between two teenagers whose sexual relationship has different impacts on their physical and emotional development. In *Jinxiugu zhi lian* [Love in splendor valley, 1987], a young woman bored with her routine family and career life seeks to gain a new sense of identity through a short but refreshing reunion with her platonic lover. In 1989, Wang published *Gangshang de shiji* [A century on a hillock], a tale of adultery and sexual transgression. In these works, Wang's unusually bold depictions of sexual desire and experience offended conservative critics but was welcomed by others as a sign marking the evolution of literary ideas and the progress of society.

Except for Zhang's *Mimosa* and Wang's *Love in Splendor Valley*, all the other works mentioned above refer to the Cultural Revolution as part or all of the historical background of their stories. Identifying sexuality as a neglected or repressed aspect of human life in the past, the sexual representations in the works

of Zhang and Wang redeem sex and desire for individuals from an era of "gender erasure."[26] While breaking the thematic taboo on sexuality, however, the two writers diverge in how desire is gendered and defined in relation to politics. While Zhang emphasizes the political overtone of sexuality, Wang treats sexuality as an instinctual and natural force of human life and downplays the sociological implication of desire.

In Zhang's works where the Cultural Revolution and sexuality form a central part of the narrative, the sexual experience of the main characters is more often than not determined by their social and political situation. In other words, one's sexual identity is often subordinate to his or her social and political identity. As a result, sexuality is experienced less in the personal dimension but is more closely related to the transformation of the social and political situation of the protagonists. In *Half of Man is Woman*, the sexual dysfunction suffered by the hero is the direct outcome of his awkward situation of being a political outcast. In *Used to Dying*, the physical and spiritual torture undergone by the hero in the labor camp is transformed into valuable symbolic capital after the Cultural Revolution, which makes him a legendary figure and attracts an American woman to become his passionate lover. In these works, human sexuality is intimately combined with political implications. If political persecution deprived the heroes of their basic physical need and psychological satisfaction as a human, and particularly, a male, only the end of the political discrimination or the redress of their political reputation can resume for them a normal and enjoyable sex life.

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[26] For a discussion of the construction of gender images during Mao's years, see Mayfair Yang, 1999.

In both works, sexuality becomes a trait based on which the heroes define their subjective identities. However, the self-realization of the heroes is not the result of individual resistance, but is preconditioned by political freedom and given to the individuals by an enlightened party leadership. At the discursive level, this mode of narrative participated in the promotion of socialist de-alienation in the early post-Mao era. As Jing Wang points out, the intellectual discourse of socialist de-alienation proliferating in the early 1980s was often constructed on a clear-cut dichotomy of the oppressor and the oppressed, which identifies the origin of the oppression as a certain external force: the repressive party-state, Mao's voluntarism, a residual feudalism, and so forth (1996, 16). In Zhang's stories, the Cultural Revolution itself is represented as the circumstantial source of sexual oppression. In other words, the protagonists are exempted from the burden of self-reflection which brings in the question of internalized oppression. With the origin of the oppression imposed by a specific sociopolitical circumstance, the repressed libidinal energy can only be revitalized through the restoration of the social order and the political de-alienation under the leadership of the party-state. In this sense, sexuality emerges not as a privileging subjective identity breeding the power of personal liberation and ideological subversiveness, but as a subsidiary force of post-Mao socialization under the guidance of state power.

If Zhang Xianliang presents sexuality in the social and political dimension of people's life, Wang Anyi views sex as a part of the human nature that deserves special exploration. Treating sexual desire as a powerful physical instinct, Wang

makes circumstantial features subsidiary elements in affecting the sexuality of her main characters. Compared with Zhang, Wang's approach has been affirmed by some literary critics as less dogmatic and more "modern." For instance, Chen Sihe views the sexuality presented in Wang's works as a metaphor of human behavior and relationships in general (1991, 593). Helen Chen values Wang for her description of the constructive role played by sexuality in the formation of human subjectivity, through which desire processes aesthetic value and becomes a life force that cures wrecked bodies and corrupted souls (1998, 95).

Reading Wang's works from a feminist perspective, her representation of sexuality and desire can be identified as a subversive discourse in response to a standardizing discourse which portrays Chinese women as a metaphor of nationalist myths or male suffering. For Wang's heroines, sex and desire are not only agencies for self-fulfillment, but also areas in which they question and reverse the established gender hierarchy. However, it is misleading to understand Wang as an advocate of sexual freedom, considering that the sex life experienced by the protagonists in some of Wang's works problematizes, rather than confirms, the liberatory power of sexuality.[27] In this respect, Wang's works break a moralizing model of repressing sexuality, yet her promotion of sexuality is based

[27] In Wang's work, "pleasure" itself is not always legitimized as a self-sufficient end of desire. In *Love in a Small Town*, the sexual indulgence that bonds two teenaged dancers together delays their mutual commitment, destroys their longing for marital life, and turns them into fierce enemies. In *Love in a Barren Mountain*, the extramarital relationship between the two main characters is not only censured by society but also self-charged by the protagonists themselves, which makes the fulfillment of sexual desire a psychological burden rather than a life force of self-assurance. Furthermore, Wang's understandings of femininity and gender roles in sexual experience are often conventional in nature. This can be seen when the confused teenage girl who struggles with her own irrational, uncontrollable sexual impulses eventually feels "clean" and finds peace of mind through her motherhood experience (*Love in a Small Town*). In another place, the attractive body of the heroine is described as both "innocent" and evilly seductive (*A Century in a Hillock*).

on her own moralizing rationality that validates certain functions of sexuality (e.g. reproduction and marital love) while denies other associated aspects, for example, libidinous obsession and irrationality.

Compared with Zhang, Wang's sexual representation seemingly disputes a conventional combination of eroticism and politics. Making circumstantial and historical factors fade away before the determinant power of erotic desire, Wang's stories have been celebrated as a breakthrough that redeems sex for nature from social and political dimensions of human life. Nevertheless, the advocacy of sexuality as a "human nature" by Wang and some critics creates a discourse that endows sexuality with a transcendent quality. Thus, desire is transformed to be the carrier of cultural subversion to Mao's revolutionary history. By distancing sexuality from politics, Wang's stories imply the dehumanizing nature of Maoist ideology and participate in the discursive construction of socialist humanism to smooth out an undesired past.

SEXING THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION: TWO NOVELLAS BY WANG XIAOBO

Challenging an established narrative pattern which highlights or implies the repressive or alienated effect of Mao's ideology on sexuality, Wang Xiaobo's writings provide an alternative perspective to contemplate the relationship between sexuality and politics, as the Cultural Revolution releases, rather than represses, the libidinal energy of his protagonists. In *The Golden Age*, the hero Wang Er recalls his days as a sent-down youth in Yunnan where he met a female doctor of bad moral repute who later became his lover. This "romance," however, is not purely romantic. Seen through the recollections of Wang Er, the heroine

Chen Qingyang approaches Wang with the hope that he can help demonstrate that she is not a slut. Wang Er, instead, advises Chen to actually commit adultery since there will be no other way to clear her name. The proposed reasoning of Wang Er is that if one cannot defend one's innocence in an absurd era, the only means of resistance is to make one's accused guilt a fact. In Chen's case, if being physically attractive becomes a suspicious sin in an ascetic social environment, then indulgence in one's carnal desire can be viewed as an effective way to fight against enforced moral and ideological normalization. Later in the story, the hero enjoys a "sex carnival" with the heroine, which makes them the target of political accusation. Ironically, the persecutorial public meetings become a cathartic force of sexual pleasure since these experiences actually stimulate the heroine to demand for even more sexual satisfaction from her lover.

The Golden Age deviates from a prevalent mode of representation which emphasizes the Cultural Revolution's negative effect on sexuality, since the political persecutions and social discriminations endured by the protagonists fail to make them passive and powerless victims. By actively "committing the crime" and carelessly facing the persecution, Wang Er and Chen Qingyang are fully engaged in "illicit" sexual activities with each other. Compared with the two main characters who find enjoyment in sex, those revolutionary cadres and masses who persecute them can only ease their sexual desire through indirect or perverted ways, such as peeping at the scene when they are having sex or pressing them to confess the details of their sexual relationship. In other words, when political power fails to control people's sex life, the Cultural Revolution becomes a fair

game played between two sides rather than a violent catastrophe leading to the indisputable victimization of the innocent and the absolute dictatorship of the evil.

If the sexual expression in *The Golden Age* subverts the power hierarchy of the persecutor and the persecuted, another story by Wang complicates the relationship between sexuality and revolution when a political occasion is ultimately transformed into sexual scenes. In *The Love in the Revolutionary Era*, Wang addresses the libidinous tension and sexual implication embedded in the "revolutionary" circumstance of heroism and asceticism. The hero, Wang Er, is a politically "backward" young worker who faces a fabricated accusation of an "indecent act" and is forced to receive "help and education" (*bangjiao*) from X Haiying, the secretary of the branch of the Communist Youth League in his factory. Ironically, the girl is physically attracted to Wang Er and ends up having sex with him. The political enthusiasm is thus replaced by an abrupt eruption of carnal passion.

The sexual relationship described in *The Love in the Revolutionary Era* is controversial and uncommon in several senses. First, whereas some previous works dealt with love transgressing cultural gaps and social status, this novella is the first one that eroticizes the Cultural Revolution in its description of a sexual relationship which violates political boundaries dividing the "good" and the "bad." In addition, this novella distinguishes itself by the way it releases the inherent tension between sexual desire and revolutionary passion when sex finds its stimulant in revolutionary imaginaries.

SEXUAL DESCRIPTION AS A PROMOTION OF SEXUAL LIBERATION AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM: A PREVALENT READING OF WANG XIAOBO

In these two works, Wang Xiaobo's direct descriptions of sex caused controversy and received various responses from his publishers, literary critics and common readers. While the mainstream literary critics commented on Wang's works with a cautious silence, Wang's admirers circulated his works among them, created websites devoted to Wang. Some even went further to identify themselves as the "running dogs" (*zougou*) of the writer (Xiang Zi, 2002).

Among those who gave commendations on Wang's sexual description, Wang's publishers initially promoted a prevalent interpretation that reads the "sex carnival" in Wang's works as a strong promotion of individual freedom and political subversion. For instance, Zhu Wei, the editor of one of Wang's journal columns, claims that *The Golden Age* transmits a yearning for human freedom through its description of sexual indulgence enjoyed in a repressive era (2002). This view is shared by the editor of *The Golden Age*, who emphasizes the overwhelming liberating power of sexuality by introducing sexual indulgence expressed in Wang's stories as something capable of delivering people from the "shadow" of history.[28]

Indicating sexuality as a basic stronghold of political resistance and personal freedom, this mode of interpretation highlights the invigorating power of sexuality since it considers sex a powerful channel of personal expression and an effective way of political rebellion. Emphasizing the politically subversive nature

[28] See "Capsule Summary" in *Huangjin shidai* [The golden age]. Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1997, 5.

of sexuality, this interpretation of Wang's sexual description can be understood as a marketing strategy rather than a compassionate endorsement of an unconventional piece of writing. Emphasizing the sexual theme in Wang's works, the interpretations by Wang's editors highlights the "controversial" aspect of his writing that would attract readers. At the discursive level, this interpretation ascribes Wang's sexual representation to the received narrative pattern that denounces the Cultural Revolution as a repressive era and treats sexuality as a "natural" desire antagonistic to political coercion. By doing this, the editors' interpretations protect Wang's unusual sexual explicitness from being officially charged as a representation of "vulgar interest and bad taste" (*diji quwei*). Moreover, this interpretation implicitly invokes certain Western cultural theories that affirm the constructive force of sexual liberation as it works for personal change and social progress.[29] Sexual explicitness, in this respect, becomes a facet of modernity legitimized in the process of modernization and inscribes itself in a global imagination.

Endorsing the sexual representation in Wang Xiaobo's works as an indication of political subversion and individual freedom, this understanding of Wang's works is based on an emphasis of the positive effect of sexuality in the creation of people's subjectivity. I question such an interpretation since I have noticed that Wang's writings sometimes problematize rather than celebrate the roles played by desire in the formation of human identity. In the following two

[29] A genealogical survey of the development of these theories is too complex to be conducted here and beyond the scope of my research. Referring to Larson's brief outline, I designate these cultural theories in terms of their discursive function that relates sexuality with ideas of liberation, anti-authority rebellion, and personal pleasure. See Larson 1999, 427-28.

sections of this chapter, I analyze Wang's two novellas respectively from the perspective of desire and perversion. Based on textual analysis, I argue that although the sexual indulgence in these stories forms a striking contrast to the ascetic background of the Cultural Revolution, it is not enough, sometimes even misleading, to understand the sexual expression in his works as a gesture of political resistance. Moreover, it is questionable to explain Wang's sexual explicitness as an unconditional advocacy of sexual freedom as a means of self-affirmation and individuation. Rather than politicizing sexuality or polarizing sex and politics as mutually exclusive, Wang's works inquire into the complex relationship between political power, human desire and the formation of people's identities.

THE DIFFERENT FUNCTIONS OF DESIRE: *THE GOLDEN AGE*

The Golden Age is one of the most influential and controversial works by Wang Xiaobo. In this work, one question calling for inquiry is the changing nature of desire. At the beginning of the story, the sexual relationship between the educated youth Wang Er and the sent-down doctor Chen Qingyang is not idealized as a natural development from mutual attraction. On the contrary, the author deprives his protagonists of any chance to start their romance as devoted lovers. From the beginning, Chen and Wang diverge from each other in their understandings of the function of sexuality. To Wang Er, his initial motive to seduce Chen is purely physical:

> I tried to seduce Chen Qingyang on the night of my twenty-first birthday because Chen Qingyang was my friend, and also, (her) breasts were full and well shaped, (her) waist was slim, (her) bottom was round. Besides,

> her neck was upright and slender; (her) face was very pretty too. I wanted to have sex with her, and believed that she should not disagree. Supposing she wanted to borrow my body to practice dissection, I would surely go for it; for this reason, there should be no problem if I wanted to borrow her body for a use. The only problem was that she was a woman, and women were always a little bit narrow-minded. So I had to enlighten her. As a result, I started to explain what 'loyalty to one's friend' meant. (9)

Through Wang Er's self-revelation, it is corporeal desire that drives him to approach Chen Qingyang. Chen, on the contrary, loathes physical intimacy but accepts Wang because she is moved by his offer of "great friendship" and "personal loyalty."

I would like to borrow a point made by Judith Butler to illuminate the different roles played by desire in the construction of Wang's and Chang's subjectivities. In her discussion of desire, Butler refers to a distinction between two kinds of desire initially defined by Spinoza and later developed by Nietzsche. One is a self-acquisitive desire, a sign of selfishness; the other is a self-preservative desire, functioning as a sign of life-affirmation (1995, 378). This clarification is useful to identify the desires originally associated with Wang Er and Chen Qingyang. To Wang, desire is a bodily instinct of an adult male like himself. To Chen, desire leads to not only a physical bond, but also a symbolic, intimate link between two people. If Wang acquires sex to make up for a physical "unfulfillment" of himself, Chen offers sex to confirm her faith in human interaction. Moreover, Chen's "spiritual crisis," a long-felt sensation of loneliness that is a basic living condition of humankind, compels her to commit herself to Wang's "friendship." In this respect, sex fulfills the physical desire of Wang but bears spiritual significance to Chen.

The different understandings of desire also determine their special attitudes toward sexuality and each other. Experiencing sex in a more intuitive, sensuous way, Wang Er tries various body positions to satisfy his sexual fantasia and especially enjoys an "entertaining" style of lovemaking. Affiliating sex with "great friendship," Chen restrains her sensory pleasure during sex to convince herself that her intimacy with Wang is for the fulfillment of her promise of personal loyalty. Since sex bears a transcendental meaning to Chen, she feels blameworthy for her orgasm, yet insists on her "innocence" and runs away with Wang to show her loyalty when Wang faces possible political persecution. Wang and Chen's relationship is exposed and criticized as a typical case of refusing "thought reform" due to their "decadent thinking." The two undergo a rash of questioning and public humiliation. Eventually, a confession written by Chen sets them free, yet Chen refuses to tell Wang the content of her confession and thereafter drifts apart from Wang.

With the unfolding of the plot, it is surprising to see how the nature of desire associated with Chen changes when she, rather than Wang, becomes the initiator and the one who enjoys sex. The public humiliation experienced by Wang and Chen seems to affirm the "innocence" and "loyalty" of the heroine at the beginning, who believes that her sexual relationship with Wang asserts her personal belief in unconditional friendship. However, Chen eventually suffers another spiritual crisis. At the end of the story, Chen finally tells Wang during their reunion twenty years later that in her last confession she admited that she gradually fell in love with Wang and started to enjoy the bodily pleasure when

they had sex. This revelation shatters Chen's self-identity. To Chen, the moment she admits her emotional and bodily attachment to Wang she forgoes her original belief in the transcendental nature of her desire. When pleasure itself becomes the end of sex, it destabilizes the base upon which Chen constructed her subjectivity. It is this self-discovery, which makes Chen feel confused and "sinful," that eventually severs Chen's relationship with Wang.

Reading the story from the perspective of desire, it is problematic to view the sexual indulgence in *The Golden Age* as an unreserved advocacy of sexual pleasure to serve as a means of self-realization. Instead of constructing a desiring subject, the erotic lure of desire becomes a destructive force to subvert the subjectivity of Chen Qingyang, reverses her intentionality and confuses her self-identity. In this respect, *The Golden Age* satirizes an idealized association of sexual expression with a freedom-producing modernity since sexuality loses its generally liberating meanings when desire is restored as an individual pleasure.

SEXUAL LURE AND POLITICAL PASSION: *THE LOVE IN THE REVOLUTIONARY ERA*

Similar to *The Golden Age*, *The Love in the Revolutionary Era* deals with sexuality in a background of the Cultural Revolution. In this novella, the relationship between sex, human subjectivity and politics is further complicated when sexual desire is directly associated with revolutionary passion enacted in a sadomasochistic game.

In modern Chinese literature, "revolutionary plus love" is a classical theme that always relates sexuality to politics. In the literary works of the May Fourth period, the sexual anxiety suffered by individuals was usually regarded as

a reflection of the weakness of the country and the "sickness of the society," which made the resolution of national and social problems a precondition of individual freedom.

In the late 1920s, the popularization of "revolutionary romanticism" first established "revolution plus love" as a narrative model. In his study of revolutionary romanticism, Kuang Xinning provides a structuralistic analysis of the relationship between love and revolution represented in this mode of writing. In his view, this narrative model declares revolution a hegemonic position over love since revolution always ends up as the highest signifier that displaces the function of love as the initiative signifier (1998, 97).

When love is politicized and incorporated into the cause of a revolution, people's sexual preference becomes an indicator of their political consciousness, and one's choice of a lover and sexual partner manifests his or her political stand. It is noteworthy that some literary works on the Cultural Revolution written in the post-Mao era break this cliché by describing love between two people belonging to "opposite" classes. For instance, Liu Xinwu's *Ruyi* [Wishes fulfilled, 1980] portrays a love affair between an old man of the underclass and an old woman with imperial blood lineage. However, since the woman is depicted as a sympathizer of the poor from an early age and a rebel to her own "parasitic" family, she is not portrayed as a member of the exploitive class, but someone who shares the same values and consciousness with the old man of the opposite class. Thus, *Wishes Fulfilled* is not about love winning over politics, but a story that redefines love in relation to politics. Moreover, the narrative in *Wishes Fulfilled*

downplays the significance of sexuality in this relationship since the "transgressive" love between the two protagonists becomes purely platonic when their marriage plan is put off under huge social pressures and eventually becomes an unfulfilled wish caused by the tragic death of the heroine.

Wishes Fulfilled is an example showing the difficulty of representing love and sexuality going beyond political boundaries. In the conventional narrative model of "revolution plus love," if the representation of the emotional attachment between two people from different classes is rare, a sexual relationship involving a "revolutionary" and his or her political opposite becomes a thematic taboo. Thus, the sexual representation in *The Love in the Revolutionary Era* is politically offensive since it not only highlights a sexual relationship defying the ascetic social environment of the Cultural Revolution, but also describes the erotic allure that attracts a "revolutionary activist" who is supposedly capable of resisting the "corruptive" temptation of physical desire. This narrative is made possible partly by a changed perception of the nature of the Cultural Revolution itself. Since the Cultural Revolution has been publicly repudiated as "ten years of chaos," it is no longer officially regarded as a real "revolution." For this reason, the transgressive sexual love represented in the story is less blasphemous than it first appears to be. However, instead of regarding Wang's alternative narrative of sexuality and revolution as a parody of the absurdity of a specific historical period, I prefer to view this work as a text of psychoanalysis probing into the erotic dimension of revolution.

When love is associated with politics, sexuality becomes more than a natural, primitive and physical concern. Contextualized in a specific revolutionary era, the libidinous energy of sexuality might be channeled into mass emotion and political passion.[30] However, as a sensuous, bodily desire, sexuality always includes an aspect to become a counterforce of a revolution. If a revolution as a collective cause demands the total dedication of an individual, sex needs to be experienced as an individual pleasure. If a revolution justifies the sacrifice of one's own takings for the common good of the people, sex requires personal attachment and repels the intrusion of public opinion. This may explain why sexual expression is always excluded from classical revolutionary narratives, and people's "sexual misbehavior" often costs their political prospects.

Seen from this perspective, *The Love in the Revolutionary Era* is more than a forgoing of an established mode of expression that makes love subordinate to political needs. Besides prioritizing sexual urges over "revolutionary consciousness," Wang's story highlights the "staged" and the "sadomasochistic" nature of both sex and revolutions when X Haiying intentionally structures her sexual feelings in revolutionary imageries related to violence. For instance, during their sexual encounters, X Haiying always pictures Wang Er as a "cruel-hearted Japanese" while identifying herself as an innocent Chinese girl raped by him. In other sexual scenes, X Haiying imagines herself as a faithful revolutionary woman who is undergoing an enemy's torture. For instance, she especially likes to see her nipples clamped by Wang Er because this image reminds her of a scene

[30] In his study of the aesthetic dimension of the political life of the Cultural Revolution, Ban Wang addresses how the revolutionary films produced during this period redirect libidinal intensity into revolutionary passion. See Wang 1997, 136.

of torture suffered by a female communist interrogated by the Japanese (305). What also draws attention to the staged nature of sex and revolutions is how sex subverts the power relations between the two protagonists defined by political hierarchies in reality. Wang Er, who has been constantly satirized and roughly treated by X Haiying on different occasions, is given the chance to "abuse" and victimize his "educator" in various sex scenes.

Taking account of the ascetic social atmosphere in the Cultural Revolution, it is understandable that people like X Haiying would regard sex as a dangerous temptation or a sign of defilement. If enjoying sex as an individual pleasure means a corruption of one's revolutionary spirit, "suffering" sex as a form of persecution imposed on the good by a "class enemy" releases the tension between sexuality and revolution. This may explain why X Haiying needs to display her red panties whenever she has sex with Wang. To X Haiying, red symbolizes chasteness and victory. Putting on her red panties right after sex means the inevitable "defeat" of the class enemy and the uncorrupt "triumph" of the revolutionary.

In this story, it is particularly interesting to see how specific physical features and body positions during sexual acts are encoded with revolutionary meanings. In X Haiying's sexual theater, for instance, the "political backwardness" of Wang Er, his "fierce" looking and heavy body hair are all necessary conditions that make him an ideal candidate to play the role of the bad—in X's characterization—the Japanese "rapist," the representation of the class enemy, and the embodiment of the counterrevolutionary force. What

structures X Haiying's particular sexual feelings, which view sex as a torture, is the same reasoning that justifies the repression of sexual desire in the name of revolution.

If *The Love in the Revolutionary Era* presents a sexual theater played in the background of the Cultural Revolution, what makes revolution a reserve from which sexual energy can be tapped? Why did the author choose revolutionary imageries symbolizing the strong will of the communists, such as the suffering interrogation and enduring torture, as sexual metaphors? The story of Wang Er and X Haiying suggests the possibility that revolution is simultaneously a repressive force and a constructive power of sexual creativity. In what sense does revolution become sexy?

A clue lies in the fundamental nature of revolutions and sexuality in their practices; both make distinctions and produce strategic relations relying on systems of power. Just like sexual practice involves two seemingly opposite states: servitude and control, revolution as a power struggle generates constant battles between two contrary forces: the dominated and the dominant. In Wang Er and X Haiying's "staged" sexual experience, sex enslaves a human subject as a conquered object just as revolution brings violence upon an individual. What is interesting about this narrative is not that sex appropriates the rhetoric of politics, for it is common that the political phrases were used to explain people's motivation and behavior in daily life during the Cultural Revolution. What is unusual about Wang's sexual expression is how a common feature—the

endurance of pain and the delight accompanied with it—makes a sadomasochistic sexual play an occasion to act out revolutionary ideology.

Seen as the highest goal and the loftiest cause to be achieved, revolution justifies bloodshed and sacrifice and has to be won at all costs, which makes violence a necessary price. For instance, due to the limited financial and military resources, the victory of the Chinese Communist Party was drawn from extravagant efforts, understood as a heroic repression of one's worldly desire, and accomplished at the expense of the unconditional self-sacrifice of the revolutionaries.

In Wang's story, X Haiying's sexual relationship with Wang Er is an imagined recreation of the revolutionary experience of self-sacrifice, especially the endurance of physical torment caused by the "class enemy." This savage experience is somewhat "staged" since Wang Er is not allowed to physically hurt his sexual partner in the way he wants, and his acting out as a "rapist" is an involuntary and passive response to X Haiying's body language of "heroic" resistance. Since it is up to X Haiying, the one who holds political power in reality, to initiate the relationship, determine the character allocation, and control the way the "game" is played, this sexual play illuminates an underlying link between political power and sexual power. When the "perpetrator" is forced to impose "violence" on the "victim" to fulfill the revolutionary fantasy of the latter, the sadomasochistic game of dominance and resistance becomes an act to reinforce revolutionary ideology and perpetuate revolutionary morality.

In twentieth-century Western cultural theory, sexual liberation has been treated as a powerful force that grants personal fulfillment and subjective independence to a desiring individual (Larson 1999, 426-30). Taking issue with the institution of power in a modern society, Michel Foucault develops a theory that relates patterns of power established within sexuality to patterns of power throughout social bodies. In Foucault's theory, radical erotic transgression like sadomasochism, which forms an interchangeable relation between the master and the slave in the pursuit of extreme sensations of bodily pleasure, is regarded as a creative enterprise, a way for an individual to escape discursive subjugation, and a means of personal resistance to play with ideological and cultural normalization.[31] If putting on a sexual show of master and slave means a daring declaration of individuality in a Foucaultian view, X Haiying's sexual adventure, acted out in a perverse form, differs from what sadomasochism is supposed to mean in Foucault's explanation. If sadomasochism is understood by Foucault as a staged sexual experience that makes sex a taste—that is, purely sexual, purely individual, severed from love and personhood—then the staged sadomasochism directed by X Haiying is a betrayal to pure sexual pleasure since it is a re-enactment of revolutionary imageries and a rehearsal of revolutionary ideology. When revolutionary discourse enters the subconsciousness of a desiring human subject and controls the structuring of his or her sexual feelings, sexuality becomes a

[31] In Foucault's view, sadomasochism as a sexual game is a way of experimenting with the nature of power. Sexuality, when acted out in the S/M game, is about pure pleasure. Since sexuality is always relying on systems of power, the concept of play in the S/M game provides the sexual agents a way to act outside of power structures and to step outside the scientific discourse of sexuality. See Halperin 1995, 87.

physical affirmation of political socialization, a gesture of ideological assertion rather than a self-conscious choice of personal resistance.

As a sadomasochistic recreation of the revolutionary experience, the sexual relationship between Wang Er and X Haiying redefines the meaning of sexuality contextualized in a "revolutionary" environment. In Wang's story, sexual pleasure is acquired with political power, justified as a torture, and enjoyed with hatred. What is highlighted in the work is the power of a utopian, revolutionary morality in the construction of human subjectivity. X Haiying's particular kind of sexual fantasy may seem odd when evaluated in Foucault's theoretical model since it replaces physical pleasure with revolutionary morality as the motivating force to construct her subjective identity. However, it is viewed as natural and consequential in a society in which the *revolutionary sincerity* and *moral purity* of people are valued as forces to overcome physical drawbacks, mental weaknesses, environmental hardships and material disadvantages. When revolution not only justifies bloodshed and sacrifice but also embellishes the torment born in the name of the revolution, physical suffering can be a real pleasure explained in a pathological sense. This is the reason that Mao identifies peasants and workers to be "cleaner" than intellectuals although the former do hard labors and have dirty hands and cow dung on their feet (1966, 808). What underlies this statement is the separation between body and mind, a specific "body dialectic" that relates physical appearance and sensation to spiritual and political consciousness. In other words, one's spontaneous physical experience has to be measured in its moral significance and revolutionary nature in the

formation of his or her subjective identity. Following this logic, the sexual experience of X Haiying is a "genuine" subjective construction in the context of revolution rather than a perverted self-alienation according to Western theories of sexuality.

"WANG XIAOBO PHENOMENON"

If Western cultural theories define sexuality as a core facet of modernity because it produces an individualization of the desiring subject as an independent agent in the social world (Larson 1999, 427), then in 1990s China, sexual expression became a free-floating signifier endowed with various, sometimes contradictory, connotations in the competition of discursive and practical powers. This can be seen in Wang's case when Wang himself and his sexual representations were appropriated in the media's construction to legitimize certain value judgments, justify particular cultural stances, and make specific social distinctions.

In 1990s China, Wang Xiaobo's writing career represents a specific form of position-taking of a writer in a changing cultural field. As a former educated youth, Wang entered the university after the Cultural Revolution and majored in trade and economics. Wang was nevertheless interested in literature, especially Western modernism. In the early 1980s, Wang went to the United States and obtained his master's degree in Asian studies. After returning to China, Wang taught at Peking University and People's University before he quit his job and became a freelancer in 1992.

Wang started writing fiction at an early age, long before his teaching career. But he had difficulty getting his works published in mainland China, mainly because of his bold description of sexuality. Wang's works were well accepted overseas and won two awards in Taiwan. In mainland China, he was better known as a columnist of satirical essays and an activist of gay rights, who conducted the first gay and lesbian research in China with his wife, American-trained sociologist Li Yinhe. Wang is also known as the screenwriter of *Donggong, xigong* [East palace, west place, 1997], a film about gay life in Beijing that was banned in China but highly accredited in the West.

Wang's writing career came to an abrupt end in 1997 when he died of a heart attack just before the long-delayed publication of a selection of his stories. His sudden death, however, made him the focus of media reporting and attracted a large number of readers to his writings.[32] Although the mainstream literary critics were still reluctant to consecrate Wang's literary achievement, his admirers praised Wang as a literary genius for his original language style, creative imagination, free spirit and rational thinking, as well as his choice of living a "liberal" lifestyle as a freelance writer. All of a sudden, Wang and his works became the hot talk of the time, which induced the emergence of a specific "Wang Xiaobo phenomenon."

The particular significance of "Wang Xiaobo phenomenon" was not only reflected in the popularity of his works, but also shown in a series of memorial articles and activities organized five years after his death, in which Wang Xiaobo

[32] In 1997, Wang's wife Li Yinhe and his friend Ai Xiaoming edited a book including articles in memory of Wang Xiaobo. In this book, Wang was idolized as a "romantic knight" (langman qishi), a "wandering lyric poet," (xingyin shiren), and a "liberal thinker" (ziyou sixiangzhe), 1997.

was labeled as a "cultural martyr" who sacrificed his life for his belief in the "freedom of thinking." His background of overseas education, his choice of quitting his teaching jobs from two of China's most prestigious universities, his dedication to "pure literature" in an increasingly commercialized society, his research in homosexuality, his interest in sexual representation—all these features come together to create a specific cultural image of Wang, which make him a cultural icon representing liberal values in the 1990s China.

"LIBERALIST" WANG XIAOBO: THE BIRTH OF A CULTURAL ICON

Since it has been claimed that one of the most significant values of Wang's works is its advocacy of "freedom"—a way of living without "any form of restraint" (Zhu Wei 2002), a study of the media's idolization of Wang will help us to understand how Wang is transformed from a freelancer to an iconic "liberalist" within a few years after his passing. It is noteworthy that before Wang's sudden death, he had acquired a certain recognition as a freelance columnist. Although it was hard for Wang to get his fiction published, his essays appeared regularly in respected academic journals, popular magazines and influential newspapers such as *Dushu* [Reading], *Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan* [Sanlian life weekly] and *Nanfang zhoumo* [Southern weekend]. As an acclaimed columnist, Wang attracted attention not only for his distinguishable language style and the values promoted in his essays, but also for his lifestyle as a freelancer who did not belong to any work unit, had no regular salary income, and pursued a non-profit writing career just to show his talent in literature and to pursue his interest in writing.

Wang Xiaobo's choice to become a freelancer was the result of both personal determination and specific circumstantial factors. Claiming that he chose to become a writer because he firmly believed in his writing talent, Wang was determined to distinguish himself from the "silent majority" in order to pursue individualized writing (1997, 86). Different from freelancers who depend on writing to make a living, Wang enjoyed the financial security and family support provided by his wife.[33] In the 1990s, the development of the cultural market brought about the prosperity of publishing, which provided numerous opportunities for freelance writers to sell their works. As a middle-aged, highly educated and Western-trained intellectual, it was not difficult for Wang to access various channels to get some of his writings published.

If the transition of Wang from a university lecturer to a freelance writer was made possible by specific preconditions (educational background, financial situation, market demand, and so forth.), this transition has been idealized as a choice of the free will in the construction of the media. After his death, an image of Wang as a representative of the "liberals" was elaborately promoted in various cultural activities organized by the main patrons of his writings, namely, journal editors, newspaper publishers and on-line reader groups—mostly college students and urban youths. Such a tendency can be clearly seen in a series of articles published in *Sanlian Life Weekly* in 2002. Five years after Wang's departure, this journal, which identifies urban "white collar" youth and the formative "middle

[33] As Wang's wife Li Yinhe recalls later, Wang knew from the beginning that writing "serious literature" could never be a profitable job. However, Wang was able to pursue his interest in writing since "even if Xiaobo cannot earn a cent, we are still able to survive" (1997, 200-01)). Li's remark indicates the "non-profit," idealistic nature of Wang's career choice.

class" as its targeted reader group, organized a special column in memory of the controversial writer under the title of *Wang Xiaobo he ziyou fenzimen* [Wang Xiaobo and the 'liberals']. In these articles, Wang was respectfully referred to as a "liberalist" (*ziyou zhuyi zhe*) (Shu Kewen 2002), a "freelance intellectual" (*ziyou zhiye de zhishi fenzi*), "a free man" (*ziyou fenzi*) (Miao Wei 2002), and so forth. Although the meanings of these terms remain ambiguous and undefined, they project a "liberal" image of Wang from different perspectives.

In these memorial articles, Wang Xiaobo becomes a cultural hero who sacrificed his life to defend his beliefs in the value of "freedom." Moreover, Wang is regarded as a "spiritual mentor" and a role model for some young people who seek to live a free and "alternative" lifestyle. Inspired by Wang, a college girl quit her office job to become a freelance writer. Living on the edge of poverty, she nevertheless enjoys a go-as-you-please lifestyle, experiencing "freedom" like walking bald-headedly in the street or visiting her neighbors in her pajamas. Another admirer of Wang parallels the writer with Luo Dayou—the Taiwanese singer who was extremely influential and popular in the 1980s—to highlight Wang's influence on young people in the 1990s (Li Wei & Xing Huimin, 2002). Through this comparison, the significance of Wang and his writings is evaluated in the realm of urban youth culture. Reading and identifying with Wang becomes a claim of "difference," a personal trademark of taste, a cultural fashion, and a distinctive feature dividing a specific consumer group from the others.

The construction of Wang as a cultural icon of "freedom" provides an illuminating example to look into the regulative force of the cultural market when

it turns a form of individualized writing into a collectively consumed cultural fashion. With the development of the cultural market, it was common for the media to associate specific literary resources with various cultural imaginations to legitimize certain value judgments and guide a consumer's orientation. In Wang's case, writing as a freelancer is romanticized as a courageous individual choice, a resistant gesture of anti-institutionalism and a symbol of absolute individual freedom. When those memorial articles praise Wang for his courage to quit his teaching job and work independently as a freelance writer, they ignore the objective factors that made his choice workable. When Wang's young admirers enthusiastically promote the "liberal" values held by Wang, they often lack insights to identify the derivable roots of his liberal stance (such as Wang's reflection of the failure of Mao's utopia and the absurdity of the Cultural Revolution) and the specific intellectual inheritance based on which his liberal stance is grounded (e.g. Russell, the tradition of Western liberalism, and so forth). When the publishers endorse the value of Wang's "alternative" writings, they avoid admitting the fact that Wang's writings are not the final products of a free will agent since their production and reception are still subject to the regulation of the cultural market and the operational logic of the literary field.

In the 1990s, Wang Xiaobo was regarded as a liberal thinker fighting against any form of cultural conformity. In his essays, Wang emphasizes the significance of common sense, the value of scientific and rational thinking, and the importance of freedom in individual and social development. At the same time, Wang is against using any ideas and value systems, even his own beliefs, to

confine other people's thinking. Discussing the value of freedom, Wang argues that "freedom" brings independence to an individual but diversity to a society (1997, 4). It is ideas like this that show Wang's liberal stance and differentiates him from those writers who value certain ideological and political viewpoints at the expense of silencing others.

To construct Wang as a cultural icon, however, Wang's personal "liberal" stance, grounded in specific historical, theoretical and intellectual contexts, is misrepresented as an abstract and ambiguous emblem of "freedom," and incorporated into the promotion of being "alternative" as a fashionable subculture of the urban youth. Appreciating Wang's works thus has become a mark of personal character distinguishing the "liberal" from the "conservative," the "idealistic" from the "snobbish," the "alternative" from the "conventional," and the "trendy" from the "outmoded." In this sense, the "Wang Xiaobo phenomenon" illuminates from a specific perspective how a particular discursive situation leads to a certain encoding and decoding of a literary text, and how alternative narratives on the Cultural Revolution can be appropriated in a specific form of discursive construction that prioritizes a certain lifestyle, value system or cultural agenda of the present.

CONCLUSION

In his essay, Wang Xiaobo points out once that during the Cultural Revolution people's psychology of sexuality was abnormal (1997, 91). Many critics believe that Wang carries out his criticism of a sexually repressive past in his fiction writing through his direct and sensational descriptions of human desire.

Although Wang himself claims that the theme of his fiction reflects simply "life itself" (1997, 37), his eroticization of the Cultural Revolution has been regarded as a gesture of political resistance, a promotion of the discourse of sexual liberation, and an endorsement of individual freedom (Jin Jia 1997, 375).

Based on my readings of the two novellas by Wang, I argue that Wang Xiaobo treats sexuality as an important part of human identity, yet he does not simply highlight the positive effects of erotic desire. In his works, revolution and sexuality are neither dichotomous to, nor synonymous with each other. Revolution does not simply "displace" or "suppress" sexuality, and sexuality never simply emerges as a liberating force that grants individual the power to fight against the revolution. If eroticism is valued for the revolutionary spirit it bears to bring about individual freedom, social progress and political liberation in Western cultural theories, Wang's sexual representation reveals the complicated relationship between human sexuality and revolutionary ideology in a specific sociopolitical context. By doing this, Wang Xiaobo's eroticization of the Cultural Revolution at times problematizes rather than participates in a modernity that is based on a privileging of the liberating power of sexuality in the formation of the subjective identity of a modern man and woman.

For this reason, Wang Xiaobo's representation of sexuality during the Cultural Revolution is neither a continuity of the humanist discourse of de-alienation, nor a simple advocacy of sexual freedom. Instead, it is a sophisticated inquiry into the nature of desire itself, a determined query of the complex relationship between political power and sexual lure, and a persistent exploration

of the possibility of individualized writing that is both subversive to the established cultural norms and prone to the appropriation of the cultural market.

Chapter Three

The Privilege to Play: Wang Shuo in Nostalgia

HISTORICAL COMING-OF-AGE TALES AND THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

In the post-Mao era, a main theme of the political critique of the Cultural Revolution is that this movement was an archetype of chaos and anarchy, characterized by internecine factionalism, and a complete breakdown of institutional order and social stability (Dittmer 1996-1997, 19). This critique partly leads to a total denial of the Cultural Revolution in general, and a particular accusation that blames the destructive and violent conduct of young people during the movement on the lack of guidance, discipline and control from social institutions of authority such as the work unit, school and family. This viewpoint is based on the rationale that a disordered society or a disintegrated family will cause detrimental effects on children's psychological development, making them puzzled, disoriented and reckless. Following this logic, living in a chaotic era such as the Cultural Revolution, the adolescents and especially the younger children are doomed to become lonely "orphans" or angry loafers, either utterly unfettered or carelessly ignored, struggling in bewilderment to figure out the ongoing events in the outside world as well as their own physical and emotional transitions in the shadows of a historical catastrophe.

Ever since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, numerous literary works have told stories of young people experiencing this history with confusion

and frustration. Portraying the ordeal of coming of age during the Cultural Revolution as a journey of disoriented struggling and of unenlightened survival, these stories not only served to uphold the prevailing social values, they also helped to work through a trauma-ridden history by providing examples that show certain wrongdoings of the past can be redressed in the present. For instance, Liu Xinwu's *Banzhuren* [Class advisor, 1977] tells the story of a middle school student who ignorantly accuses a western novel of being a pornographic book just because it touches upon the issue of love and personal feelings. Revealing how the social environment of dogmatism and asceticism during the Cultural Revolution distorted the view of the teenagers, Liu's story launches the agenda to "save" a generation of young people whose mental, psychological and physical development have been severely "delayed" by the ten-year political turbulence. Liu's story further shows that only the end of the political chaos and the coming of a new era make such a rescue task possible. In other words, the "maturation" of the young people is viewed as a logical consequence of social development, a natural byproduct of the ideological practices of thought liberation and intellectual enlightenment.

In the post-Mao period, coming-of-age during the Cultural Revolution is also a theme that has been frequently invoked by a postrevolutionary generation of writers. After the mid-1980s, it was common for avant-garde writers to use adolescents in their stories as both the protagonists and the narrators. For instance, Su Tong's series of short stories about the lives of "teenagers in the old town" (*jiucheng shaonian*) presents images of perplexed adolescents who respond to the

dramatic changes of their own minds and bodies as well as the outside world with helpless passivity or violent revolt (Wang Gan 1993, 287-88). Yu Hua's earlier works such as *Siyue sanri shijian* [The incident on April third, 1984]" and *Huhan yu xiyu* [Crying and the fine rain, 1991] also center around the lives of teenagers undergoing some sort of formative experience, who sometimes find themselves facing a confusing world in which imagination becomes a constructive part of reality.

Like the works of many other avant-garde writers, Su and Yu's stories often take on the Cultural Revolution as their background. Explicitly or implicitly, the shadows of this historical catastrophe linger on, inscribing psychological and physical scars in the lives of the young characters. Accompanying coming-of-age experiences are the metaphorical imageries such as bloody fights, frightening torture, unscrupulous adultery, shocking death and gruesome mutilation. Noting the oversaturated violent scenes found in the works of some younger avant-garde writers, critic Jing Wang diagnoses this as a symptom of trauma, a strategy to deconstruct a history that is too complex to be comprehended and too difficult to be subverted "except through the vicarious experience of committing violence to language and to the concept of history itself" (1998, 8). Wang also insightfully points out that the tragic stories of these young people have more to do with a trend of aesthetic representation that distorts the "real" than a creative "reproduction" of memory that underscores a sense of the "real." In Wang's words, lacking real-life experiences of disillusionment and patricide, yet growing up under the shadows of the Cultural Revolution, some avant-garde writers

depoliticize this history in their trauma-ridden childhood stories as a strategy of constructing "a new fictional subject with no historical, sociopolitical, or even personal identity" (1998, 11).

Distinct from the avant-gardists who hold an impious attitude toward this history, some writers in the 1990s nostalgically portrayed the Cultural Revolution as a liberating period for children to explore the world, form their subjectivity, develop their imagination, or enjoy an unrestrained time of light-hearted play. Given the fact that the youth were not generally considered a separate age group or an independent social community in their own right in previous Cultural Revolution narratives, the emergence of the childhood stories of this history draws particular attention.

In this chapter, I scrutinize two fictional works by Wang Shuo that nostalgically remember the Cultural Revolution as a "playground" of the youngsters. My study shows that when the trauma-ridden stories of growing up are replaced by the hilarious tales of childhood play and juvenile adventure, it is indicative of a broader cultural shift characterizing the change of mass mentality. Discussing how "play" described in the works serves different functions in the identity formation of the adolescents in their formative years, I also examine how the production and consumption of specific generational memories were related to the promotion of certain lifestyles and living philosophies in the 1990s, which met the need of social stratification at that time.

CHINA IN NOSTALGIA: THE DISCREPENCY OF THEORY AND REALITY

Entering the 1990s, the coexistence of an orthodox socialist political system and a booming market economy turned China into a country energized by rapid economic development yet disturbed by the complications found in the process of marketization. With history remaining ambiguous and the future being uncertain, "living in the present" becomes a prevalent mass mentality in contemporary China. Paradoxically, the "updatedness" of this present often has to be legitimized in a retrospective mode: a forward-looking China entering the last decade of the twentieth century was preoccupied with moods of nostalgia, aiming to recreate and refashion the "contemporariness" of its past with both collective and personal memories. Different in level and intensity, such a nostalgic mood can be discerned in many historically engaged fictional writings, films and other cultural products such as popular songs and MTV programs. In order to understand the significance of this phenomenon, it is necessary to understand the social, cultural and political context that enabled nostalgia to grow as a general mass mentality in China in the 1990s.

Nostalgia as a cultural fashion started in the early 1990s in the form of "Mao Zedong fever." All of a sudden the all-too-familiar images of Mao reappeared in China's big cities as decorations in theme restaurants and good luck charms hung in vehicles. In the cultural market, books treating Mao as a commoner and describing his daily life "off the altar" (*zouxia shentan*) hit the best-seller lists. Volumes of revolutionary songs composed during Mao's years were re-edited and released into the market. In 1990, the TV series *Kewang*

[Yearning] caused a national sensation. Taking Mao's years as its background, the TV melodrama promotes values such as altruism, self-sacrifice and the human will to endure hardships and material disadvantage, most of which were epochal themes setting the tone of Mao's revolutionary agenda. Throughout the 1990s, Mao and his revolutionary years were constantly retraced in multiple modes of nostalgic reminiscence in the exchanges of various forms of symbolic and economic capital. While avant-garde artists found inspirations from canonical revolutionary languages and imageries, keen businessmen also grasped the opportunity to cash in on the commercialization of Mao's revolutionary ideology.

The seemingly bizarre and unexpected nostalgia towards the Mao years bears a specific social, discursive and aesthetic significance that maps the changed cultural politics of the 1990s. If the "Tiananmen Incident" in 1989 represents the bankruptcy of the discourse of enlightenment and the collective dream of political democracy in the 1980s, China entering the 1990s was characterized by the newly-emerging social, class and generational conflicts between the urban and the rural, the center and the marginal, the young and the old, the winners in the market economy (the "New Rich") and the new social outcasts (the jobless workers, the floating populations, etc.). In a social ambience characterized by promising prosperity and a brooding sense of insecurity, nostalgia appeared as a cultural fad reflecting the intricate structure of feelings of Chinese people in the 1990s.

A study of nostalgia in China requires a critical rethinking of the function of nostalgia in its local context. Some cultural theories and psychological analyses

in the West deciphere nostalgia as a complication of modernity, a resistance to the problems brought by the global wave of modernization. Identified as a selective longing for things, persons, or situations of an often idealized past, nostalgia is sometimes considered antithetical to modernity, a turning away from what is challenged and a temporary escape to a secure place that offers a sense of community and identity (Aden 1995, 20-38). Another view attributes the rise of nostalgia to the condition of postmodernity (Baudrillard 1994, Jameson 1991). For instance, Frederic Jameson's definition of nostalgia is closely bound within the logic of late capitalism and postmodern aesthetics. To him, nostalgia works in conjunction with the concept of the pastiche and simulacrum. As a desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past, nostalgia "colonizes" the present through stylish and aesthetic representation of a lost "reality," and thus provides a sense of "pseudohistorical depth," a perception of a distanced, defamiliarized present rather than an approach to a lost era of innocence (1991, 19-21). In Jameson's framework, nostalgia is affiliated with the postmodern condition of the eternal loss of the authenticity of the past. When a history of aesthetic styles displaces a "real" history in artistic creation, any attempt to associate nostalgic language with genuine historicity is futile (19).

Are nostalgia and its stylistic and aesthetic representations a logical and chronological result of the modern Western society or postmodern condition? Taking into consideration that nostalgia arises in Communist countries and areas such as China and Eastern Europe where capitalism did not develop at the same rate or during the same period as in other parts of the world, nostalgia is by no

means a culturally and economically specific product of the capitalist society. Moreover, I question the approach to treat nostalgia as a purely aesthetic problem without any ideological connotation. In contemporary China, when multiple modes of nostalgia appear as a cultural trend, they often take various functions in marking social changes and making social distinctions.

In her inspiring essay *Xiangxiang de huaijiu* [Imagined nostalgia, 1997], Dai Jinhua discusses the cultural need for nostalgia as a fashion in the popular culture of contemporary China. To Dai, nostalgia appears as a symptom of cultural commercialism, a sign of progress and development consumed with feverish joy in the 1990s. Ban Wang, nevertheless, notices how the rise of nostalgia as a mass mentality is a commentary on both China's current reality and its prehistory. Studying nostalgia as a topic of highbrow literature, Wang argues that nostalgia serves the two functions of challenging an unsatisfied present *and* filling the gap between the past and the present (2002, 669). Identifying with Chinese intellectuals who are caught in between—realizing both the request for material progress and the problem of modernization—Wang argues that nostalgia can be constructed not only as an alternative to the homogenous narrative of capitalist globalization, but also as a resistance to the lineal current of the socialist revolution (671).

According to Dai and Wang, if consumerist nostalgia caters to a growing longing for material culture, nostalgia as an intellectual discourse constructed in literary presentations can serve as a critical commentary on both the revolutionary past and a problematic present. In short, nostalgia can be harnessed for either

oppressive or liberatory aims when it participates in the construction of a specific personal and communal subjectivity. Taking their arguments as my starting point, I will study the "Cultural Revolution nostalgia" manifested in two historical coming-of-age tales by Wang Shuo. Identifying nostalgia as *a strategy of self-positioning*, I argue that the production and reception of Wang Shuo's two stories are indicative of the roles played by personal memories in the formation of specific individual and generational identities in the 1990s.

MEMORIES OF THE UNDERAGE: THE "PREMATURE" NOSTALGIA TOWARD THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN HISTORICAL COMING-OF-AGE TALES

When nostalgia became a cultural fad, even young people developed a penchant for historical remembering. In 1997, the tenth issue of *Dushu* [Reading] published an article entitled *Zhemezao jiu kaishi huiyi le* [Starting to recollect from such an early age]. The author Li Wan, a twenty-seven year old music critic, was deeply struck by the addictive mood of nostalgia found in popular songs written by one of his generational peers. As Li puts it:

> Twenty-seven, this is the age we call youth, (an age that) ought to be full of youthful vigor, to start a career, and to press forward without any hesitation. Yet he didn't. He did nothing but be moved by the past (80).

The songwriter singled out by Li here is Gao Xiaosong. In the mid-1990s, Gao was the representative figure of a younger generation of composers who wrote campus ballads to express the moods of youthful lives and emotions in the 1980s. After Gao's first album "Xiaoyuan minyao" (*Campus ballads*) was released in 1994, some of his songs became so popular that they brought Gao national fame among his young audience. Yet Gao is only an example of young

musicians who were obsessed with composing nostalgic lyrics and memory-evoking melodies. In his article, Li Wan notices that it has been popular for young songwriters in the 1990s to represent their childhood years, adolescent experiences and collage lives in their music with sentimental attachment or melancholic longing. Describing these songs as a combination of "bourgeoisie sentimentalism" and "heroic idealism," Li attributes the popularity of the "premature" nostalgia in popular music with the identity formation of an emergent generation—young people born in the 1960s who experienced the latter stage of the Cultural Revolution as children and witnessed the coming of a pragmatic, commercialized society in their adolescent years (80-87). To these youngsters, the process of maturation represents a journey of disorientation. Growing up in a world characterized by dramatic changes of social and moral values, a retrospective gaze towards the old innocent days in their early lives is both a strategy of self-assertion and a gesture of self-exile in a perplexed present.

Li Wan's article deserves particular attention not only for its acute and timely observation which discerns sentimental "nostalgia" as a prevalent aesthetic pursuit of a group of young artists, but also for his discovery of the generational memories excavated through musical representation. In the 1990s, the popularity of "campus ballads" was indicative of a cultural trend where young adults were suffering from extreme short-term nostalgia, obstinately seeking to relive the "good old days" that they had just left behind. Such a symptom can also be found in film and literature that take coming-of-age experiences during the Cultural Revolution as the central theme they represent.

Among various modes of nostalgic representation of the Cultural Revolution, I am particularly interested in some works by a younger generation of writers. Telling coming-of-age tales from the perspective of the underage, these writers make minor historical actors such as middle school teenagers, primary school kids and kindergarten toddlers the central characters or the narrators of their stories or both.[34] In these works, the historical and political dimensions of this movement are often downplayed since the Cultural Revolution is situated as a general context in which the children grow up. Making personal remembering an issue of subjective retrospection, historical memories become meaningful, expressive and "authentic" to a specific individual or a cohort rather than to an abstract collective. Among these works, Wang Shuo's two novels in the 1990s are chosen to be the object of my current study.

DECODING "HOOLIGANISM:" DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE NATURE AND FUNCTIONS OF "PLAY"

Born in 1958, Wang Shuo started publishing fictional works as a freelance writer in the mid-1980s. Considering his age, family background and personal experiences, Wang Shuo did not experience the "rustication movement," nor did he belong to the Red Guard generation. Growing up in a military compound and encountering the high tide of the Cultural Revolution in his primary school years, Wang Shuo was among the privileged few who came of age during the Cultural Revolution, yet was exempted from the lash of political disturbance. After

[34] For instance, Chen Ran's *Yu Wangshi ganbei* [Drinking to yesterday, 1993]; Han Dong's *Juedi sanchi* [Picking up three inches, 1993]; Li Er's *Guizi jincun* [Guizi entering the village, 1997]; and Ye Zhaoyan's *Jinian shaonü loulan* [In memory of young girl Lou Lan, 1999].

graduating from middle school, Wang served in the Navy, worked as a salesman, and eventually quit his state-assigned job to pursue a writing career.

In the history of the PRC, Wang Shuo is the first self-employed writer. Actively participating in the production of fiction, TV drama and movie scripts, Wang Shuo swiftly earned fame and made a fortune, thus establishing himself as an epochal marker for the transition of the 1980s into the 1990s. Self-promoting a "best-seller consciousness" (*changxiao yishi*), Wang successfully marketed his novels by creating a group of characters referred to as "playing masters"—a cult of pleasure-seeking hooligans who took advantage of the high-profile social transition from the 1980s to the 1990s and found their space in the new consumer age by living an unproductive, decadent and "cool" lifestyle. Living in the moment, these urban loafers refused to burden themselves with the task of retrospective contemplation. In their daily lives, traces of the past, if ever referred to, were only topics satirized in jokes or shows enacted for fun.

Many critics, Jing Wang and Huang Yibing among them, identify the hooliganism in Wang Shuo's works as a gesture of anti-intellectual cynicism. Underlining this as one of the trademarks of Wang's works, the critics offer very different understandings of the philosophy of hooliganism. To a critic like Huang Yibing, hooligans in Wang Shuo's works represent a decadent version of Mao's Red Guards, a sarcastic and delusional group of young people who lost their innocence and turned out to be cynical in the violent transitions from Mao's utopia to Deng's market (2001, 138). In Huang's words, the social and ideological transformation from the late 1970s to the 1980s constituted a violent,

unpredictable and traumatic experience for the Chinese youth who had been raised in the idealized spiritual utopia of Maoism (149). Living a playful, impious and quirky lifestyle, the hooligans show mischievous and emotional resistance to a present severed from its immediate past.

If Yibing Huang attributes the vulgarization of culture in Wang's "hooligan literature" to the loss of innocence due to the historical rupture from Mao's socialist utopian to Deng's consumer society, Jing Wang discerns the historical connection between the present and the past by tracing the roots of the real-life and fictional hooligans back to the Cultural Revolution, a turbulent period during which the lawless teenagers had the opportunity to break from the orderliness of school and daily life. To Jing Wang, the adult hooligans in Wang Shuo's works are just contemporary variations of uncontrolled teenagers coming to age during the ten-year historical turbulence. Entering into the troubled water of the consumer age, the formerly unruly youths grasped the chance to recreate their childhood playground in everyday life by living on the edge of the law and social conventions (1996, 271). Growing up in a historical period when destructive practices, authoritative personalities, iconoclastic manners and playful attitudes were ideologically promoted and officially supported, the formerly restless kids swiftly changed their causes and conveniently fit into the new game of cashing in when the law of the "play" transformed from the political to the economic.

Comparing these two readings of Wang Shuo's hooligan literature, we find oppositional explanations of the mentality of the "playing masters." To

Huang, the playing masters symbolize a specific mode of subjective development. More specifically, the lifestyle of the playing masters represents an attempt to tame and dominate the "contemporariness" by disrupting the present (138-39). Tracing the chronicles of both fictional and real-life hooligans, however, Jing Wang questions the blasphemous lifestyle of the "playing masters" in Wang's work as a form of self-representation. In Jing Wang's words, hooligans do not live as improvising individuals, only as a collective. What makes them different is a "species consciousness," a collaborative memory and a clan-centered lifestyle based on mutual identification and group activity (272). In this sense, Jing Wang argues that the fictional hooligans are not real rebels given that there is no purpose for their rebellion. What Wang Shuo shows in his works was nothing more than "a narcissistic posture that appeared deceivingly seditious" (271). Wholeheartedly saturated in the sensation of the present without possessing any kind of historical reflexivity, the "playing masters" are the logical and spiritual inheritors of the Cultural Revolution.

WANG SHUO: THE PRIVILEGE TO PLAY

Are Wang Shuo's fictional hooligans the historical orphans of the Cultural Revolution who define themselves in a playful lifestyle to rebel against an undesirable present, or, on the contrary, the epochal masters of the market economy whose playful nature has been well nourished in the past historical chaos? The divergences in the views of Huang and Wang lie less in their different understandings of the relationship between the past and the present than in their explanations of the nature and function of "play" represented in Wang's works. Is

play a disguised form of self-representation or simply a narcissistic show? Is it a cynical gesture of anti-socialization or a mischievous attitude of "play for play's sake?" In other words, when "play" becomes such an essential theme in Wang Shuo's works, in what sense does it participate in the formation of the subjective identity of his characters?

A close analysis of Wang Shuo's two most recent works, in which descriptions of "play" constitute a considerable part of the narrations, will help us to understand why Wang's works made a specific appeal to young people. In Wang's works, *Dongwu xiongmeng* [Vicious animals, 1991] is the first to set its background in the past. Describing the lives of a group of adolescents that became involved in gangster riots and juvenile adventures towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, this work personalizes this history and makes it a phase of individual development rather than a collective past.

In *Vicious Animals*, it is not hard to find in the characters two basic traits characterizing Wang's adult "playing masters." First, the friendship of these unruly teenagers was built upon a strong pledge of mutual identification and group loyalty. Second, the group identity of these teenagers was constructed upon the transgression of social conventions and the disruption of the orderliness of everyday life in their behaviors and thinking. In this sense, it is easy to read this novella as an extension of Wang's former "hooligan literature." Paying special attention to the function of "play" in the cohort grouping and identity formation of the adolescents, however, I argue that *Vicious Animals* does more than trace the historical roots of the hooligan mentality.

The novella, in essence, is the story of "I," a fifteen year old middle school student who serves both as the hero and the narrator of the story. From the beginning of the novella, "I" declaims "my" fond memories towards the Cultural Revolution, which differentiate this writing from conventional narratives emphasizing the disastrous nature of this history:

> I appreciate that era in which I grew up. In that era students acquired liberation (they) never had before. They did not have to learn useless knowledge that was doomed to be forgotten later…I wasn't worried about my own future at all. This future had been pre-determined: after graduating from the middle school I would be enrolled in the army. In the army, I would serve as a four-pocket platoon leader. This was my whole dream. I had never expected to be promoted to a senior position. Because at that time "I" believed that those elders who occupied the senior positions would be immortal.
>
> Nothing had to be strived for. All I was supposed to do was to wait till I was eighteen, then it would naturally be my turn (149-50).

Here, the Cultural Revolution becomes a period during which the teenagers got the chance to explore the world without the bondage of formal schooling. Moreover, it ensures a privileged group of teenagers a bright future, thus enabling them to live a promising and worry-free life.

Not only viewing the Cultural Revolution as an era with its virtue to liberate children from social institutions of authority, "I" also describes how the freedom "I" enjoyed created a personal problem—how my sexual fantasies of an elder girl named Mi Lan—overweighs "my" concern about the outside world:

> That year international communist movements achieved remarkable victory, first in the Southeast Asia, then on the global scale. The Vietnamese Communist Party, which had always been aided by our country, captured Saigon, and then swept away the whole Indochina with irresistible force…The United States suffered a disgraceful defeat.

> Yet all these glorious triumphs could not make me feel excited anymore. I was now facing personal, extremely urgent problems that needed to be dealt with (155).

Due to lack of respect for parental authority, "I" turns to "my" peers—a group of young boys as children of "revolutionary" cadres and military officers—to seek recognition, comfort and advice. To these privileged adolescents, the Cultural Revolution made them feel an unprecedented liberty and confidence when they became the "hosts" of Beijing—a city largely depopulated of adult authority figures and elder students sent down to the countryside. Spending "our" time having fun together, "I" and my "brothers" (*gemen'r*) occasionally get involved in gangster riots and sexual adventures. Living in a world of irresponsibility, "play" becomes the central content of "our" everyday life.

As one of the representative works of Wang, *Vicious Animals* draws much attention from literary critics. Among them, some identify this work as a nostalgic invocation of the past, which serves as an emotional tribute to a memorable yet traumatic youth (Cai Xiang 1994, 373-74; Liu Xinwu 1995, 125-29). In their explanation, remembering is understood as a process of myth-making rather than a reliable source of historical reference. In my research, nevertheless, I treat nostalgic remembering in this work as *factual* representations with a concrete social and historical praxis. Based on this, I explore how narratives of youthful plays and childhood games, with their substantial social, cultural and material references, are used to evoke certain generational memories and to construct specific individual and group identities.

Describing the playful and fun-seeking lifestyle of these teenaged boys, Wang Shuo devotes considerable space in *Vicious Animals* to trace the cultural resources and fashion trends characterizing the epochal atmosphere toward the end of the Cultural Revolution. In the story, "I" recollects the books, songs, jokes, images, items of clothing, games, slang and conversational habits that characterize both the "aura" of that specific era and "my" own childhood experiences. Saturated with tangible imageries, personal remembering creates both an emotional tie with and a worldly attachment to this past. For instance, "I" remembers how certain books influenced "my" way of thinking:

> …yet my first revolutionary romanticism and longing for a dangerous and restless life was indeed inspired by them…while what fascinated me most were those episodes of romance between these revolutionaries and the bourgeois women. When Paul finally lost Tonya, I felt a deep sorrow for him. When Tonya appeared again with her bourgeois husband, I felt a heartbroken pain. Ever since then I have been searching for a compromise between revolution and romantic love (161).

Here, reading is not merely a form of entertainment, but a significant step in the process of identity formation. Clothing, among other things, also becomes an important indicator of social status, through which particular subjectivity is encoded. In the story, "I" mentions in several places that the army uniform was the most popular dress worn by teenagers during the Cultural Revolution. It is noteworthy that the popularity of army uniforms is specifically considered here not only for its designation of political correctness and revolutionary spirit, but also for its *materialness* in terms of fabric, color, style and quality, since it was the only dress that shows difference and diversity in an era when people generally wore blue cotton uniforms. In this sense, wearing an "authentic" army uniform

was not only a manifestation of political status, but also a fashion statement, a restricted way of fashion consumption, and an effective means of making and maintaining social distinction.

In the story, the "material" aspects of the past become the chief objects of reader identification, not only as historical marks, but also as carriers of particular generational memories. My recognition of the "substantial" aspect of personal memories, however, does not indicate a naïve assumption that the nostalgic retrospections in the story are all based on "real" events that actually happened in the past, given the fact that Wang himself admits that his memories of the Cultural Revolution have more to do with subjective imagination than with objective reality (Wang 2000, 130). Yet, what I am concerned with here is less the "objectivity" and "faithfulness" of historical narratives as recollections of true happenings. Instead, I view relevant memories as "authentic" and "historical" since they are indicative of specific cultural climate and fashion codes representing the culture of youth towards the end of the Cultural Revolution.

When personal memories are revoked to describe the fun-seeking lifestyle of the teenaged protagonists, "play" becomes the central theme of representation. In *Vicious Animals*, "play" is not equated to willful acts and scene making. It has been shown clearly that only certain acts and behaviors are accepted, admired and emulated by these teenagers. Some of the most sentimental and nostalgic scenes in this story are closely related to various forms of exquisite play. One example is the all-night singing of the Russian folksongs and revolutionary lyrics from the Soviet Union. Material resources are also prerequisite for participation in the

game. These are teenagers who wear authentic army uniforms, live in garden-like military compounds, eat luxurious ice creams with stolen money, read restricted publications, and hold birthday parties in the expensive Moscow Restaurant. In a word, it requires certain qualifications to be able to enjoy the excitement of play. Social class, family background, career ranking of the parents, one's financial situation, personal talent, and physical attraction are all crucial factors that play important roles to ensure a membership in the group and to define the rules of the game played. The social and material advantages enjoyed by these teenagers nourish them with a complex nature that combines worldly-wise mischievousness with romantic naivety. In their daily life, play becomes a skill, a taste and a manifestation of a superiority complex, as well as a mark of being "elite."

Since there is not much for the teenagers to worry about, play becomes almost the only means for them to show off themselves and to gain recognition from their peers. Some critics notice the violent side of play in this story, viewing the scenes of gangster fights as traumatic "coming of age events" and arguing that the hero is forced to go through these moments as rites of passage into adulthood (Cai Xiang 1997, 370; Liu Xinwu 1995, 126-27). What has been ignored by the critics is the function of play as an effective means of making a distinction, which can be used by the participants to excel other peers in a game-like competition.

A scene of street fighting in the story provides a good example of how play itself can be strategically "performed" and deceivingly evaluated. The fight happens after some street kids beat up a boy in "my" group, an incident nevertheless threatening the dignity of "our" whole community. Rushing out to

seek revenge, the agitated teenagers equip themselves with various weapons according to their ranking in the group. The leader gets a Japanese bayonet; the most envied fighting utensil for gangster riots, a sign of status and authority. The followers get knives, steel chains, hammers and awls, or whatever they can find as tools for battle. The lowest-ranking kids pick up red bricks along the way as their weapons. During the fight, "I" finds out that the kid chased and beaten up is "my" former classmate and an old friend. However, "Without saying a word, I used the red brick in my hand to hit him. I wouldn't stop although all the other kids had run away. Finally, after crushing a bloody red brick vertically on the back of his head, I ran away from the scene" (179).

In this fight scene, the brutality and extravagance of the hero are described more as a strenuous performance than as a reflection of his brutal personality. This is seen from "my" later confession of how "I" was haunted by the bloody images of his victims after the fight. Nevertheless, the actions of the hero are paid for when his "performance" is widely recognized and highly praised by the elder boys in the group, since showing loyalty to one's group in "cold-blooded" actions is a necessary quality in defining a young "player." The success of the "performance" also encourages the hero to pursue other adventures, which gives "me" the courage to approach Mi Lan, a girl who is both older and more physically mature than "I."

Other than being a means of identity construction, play also functions as a specific faculty of socialization. Breaking social conventions in play is not really a gesture of rebellion. Privileged and unfettered, there is no purpose for these

children to revolt. Being good at playing is a demonstration of one's ability to cope with his or her environment, a capacity to fit in and control rather than being alienated and controlled. On the one hand, one is supposed to follow the "rules" and play fairly to earn respect and win trust. On the other hand, since what really matters is the effect of the performance rather than the performance itself, play can no longer be a fair game. This explains why the hero saved his face and kept his membership in the group by concealing the fact that he was so intimidated after he was arrested that he burst into tears in front of the police, in contrast to another boy who was isolated and expelled from the group after his surrender to the authorities was discovered by his peers. In this sense, the days of being wild, recalled by Wang Shuo, is not a heartfelt celebration of freedom and decadence, but a claim of the "survival of the fittest" with its specific social and historical praxes.

PLAY FOR THE SAKE OF MAKING DIFFERENCE

Describing the coming-of-age experience during the Cultural Revolution, *Vicious Animals* provides a highly privatized and idiosyncratic portrait of this history. My concern here is not whether Wang's nostalgic memories of the Cultural Revolution "reflect" this history faithfully. To me, a more important question is how the subjective, cognitive-emotional set of nostalgia in the narrative makes an appeal to general public.

In Wang Shuo's writing career, *Vicious Animals* is the only work made into a movie that seems to win the heart of everyone. The story first attracted Jiang Wen, one of the best-known male actors in mainland China, to turn the

novella into his directorial debut. A huge admirer of Mao, Jiang identifies with Wang's alternative description of the Cultural Revolution on a similar experiential base. Finished in 1994, Jiang's film adaptation of Wang's work, *Yangguan canlan de rizi* (In the heart of sun), won both international fame and domestic recognition. After watching a twelve-minute highlight version of the film, France film critic Volker Schlondorff was so impressed that he invited Jiang to edit the film at the Babelsberg Studio in Berlin. In 1994, the film won the Volpi Cup for Best Actor at the Venice Film Festival. After being released in China in 1995, the film set the record for the box office that year. The success of the film drew a lot of attention to the novella itself. Despite the controversy associated with other works of Wang Shuo, *Vicious Animals* and its film adaptation became both the darling of the market and the serious business of literary critics.

Taking account of the huge commercial success the novella and the film triggered, the appeal of the story is partly caused by its iconoclastic view of the Cultural Revolution. As Liu Xinwu notes, Wang's novella makes a formerly ignored "world" emerge from the horizon of history. This particular world is not full of the struggles of the persecutors and the persecuted, but is a world of "irresponsibility" that imbues one's mind with both freedom and crisis (1995, 125-26). In this emerging world, "the children from the military compound" (*dayuan li de haizimen*) are concerned about their own needs more than the big events happening outside. In a certain sense, they are also the "victims" of this history since they are torn between a moralized ideological edification and a chaotic social reality. However, they view this discrepancy between education and

reality as an excuse to indulge rather than a reason to accuse. In this respect, the story gains particular recognition among a younger generation of readers who were formerly underrepresented as the juniors and the marginal groups in the Cultural Revolution.

Recollecting the childhood experiences during the Cultural Revolution in a nostalgic mode is not the only reason that *Vicious Animals* is popular. In my view, this story makes specific use of personal memories to respond to the needs of the present. In the novella, personal memories are associated with concrete material referents and cultural codes that mark social distinctions. In this sense, the story is not only a general remembrance of a lived past, but also a retracing of a specific aspect of this past—the fashion trends that distinguished one group of teenagers as the privileged few. In this previously ignored world, the lives of the adolescents were regulated by complicated rules of the "game." It is noteworthy that as the underage, none of these teenagers owned any material properties themselves. However, the different political, economic and cultural capital they possessed strictly hierarchized the children, which made certain lifestyle, behavior, and consumption habits determinative factors in the construction of specific individual and group identities. In this sense, the nostalgic reconstruction of "our" adolescent years in Wang's novella is more than a private reminiscence of the "happy old days," but also a fashion statement of the past, an identification with a particular lifestyle enjoyed by the privileged members of the society.

Such a representation of a privileged past is, of course, highly subjective. In his inspiring inquiry of the meanings of nostalgia, Fred Davis claims that

nostalgia occurs when certain aspects of the past make a clear contrast with those of the present. More often than not, in a nostalgic retrospection the past is viewed as "better" than the present. Nevertheless, "it is not contrast *per se* but rather *certain kinds* of subjective contrasts that engender the stuff of nostalgia" (1979, 11-12). In the case of Wang Shuo, however, a nostalgic feeling towards the Cultural Revolution is not infused with negative sentiments towards the present. In *Vicious Animals*, it is clear from the beginning that the current life "I" is living is both professionally respectable and materially satisfying. In this respect, the nostalgic mood represented in the story is related to a subjective reconfiguration of a specific past that functions as the prehistory of a happy present. Going even further, what matters in this mode of nostalgia is not the "actuality" of the happiness of the past and the pleasantness of the present. What makes this past connect with the present and this present refer to its past are certain patterns of lifestyle and cultural consumption preconditioned by social hierarchies and functioning to reproduce social distinctions. If in the Cultural Revolution these distinctions were encoded in youth culture as represented in Wang's story, in contemporary China, social differences created through cultural consumptions would re-stratify the society in every aspect of social life. In this process, the social classes are redivided, the people are regrouped, and the social hierarchies are re-established. In this process, one does not have to be experiential in order to be immersed in a nostalgic mood. It has become trendy to look back, to cast a narcissistic gaze toward the past as the surviving "fittest" of the present. In one of his articles, Wang Shuo expresses the view that his biggest contribution to

contemporary Chinese literature is the configuration of a group of "socialist new men" (*shehui zhuyi xinren*) (2002, 171). Through *Vicious Animals*, Wang and his admirers make it clear that one has to be successful, or, at least, be inspired by what "success" means now, to enjoy a sense of nostalgia. Being able to "play" is always a privilege, no matter if it is in a historical turbulence like the Cultural Revolution or in the present-day commotion of the market economy.

A DIFFERENT FUNCTION OF PLAY: PLAY FOR THE SAKE OF CONFORMITY

If in *Vicious Animals* the Cultural Revolution is remembered with fondness as years of being privileged, in *Kanshangqu henmei* [Looking very beautiful], the cohort recognition and identity construction of the pre-adolescents are built exclusively on childhood games and imitative enacting of the adult world. Published in 1999, this novel appeared after a seven-year silence of Wang, who had suffered a "mental crisis" and had been struggling with the thought of giving up writing.

In the preface of this novel, Wang Shuo recalls in detail the occurrence of his career crisis. In his retrospection, the crisis happened in 1992 after he had gained both fame and wealth as a veteran writer. After writing over one million words in novels, screenplays and TV drama scripts in the previous year, Wang describes that he suffered a "mental breakdown" and became tired of his past ways of writing. More specifically, Wang claims that he feels his finished works are a failure since they "distort life" and simplify reality by turning it into a mere comedy. This effect deviates from his initial motivation to write, which is to "restore the life as it is" (*huanyuan shenghuo*) (2000, 116).

For this reason, Wang states that his new novel is the beginning of a project of restoration, a matter-of-the-fact revelation of the *real appearance of life* as he knew and experienced it. Paradoxically, Wang continues to explain that it is impossible to rely on one's memory to provide a faithful representation of the past. In the process of writing, as Wang admits, his memory had to follow the lead of fabrication. So what can be found in his novel is nothing more than a "false reality." Since there is no way to rely on one's memory to restore the reality as actual occurrences, writing a good novel becomes a means of "manipulating words, nourishing sentiments, rectifying taste, purifying thinking, and giving the readers a happy surprise" rather than a channel of self-expression and self-idolization (8).

Reading Wang's statement, it is striking to notice the changed tone he uses to write about the function of literature. In the 1980s, Wang was (in)famous for his proclamation that writing for him is just a way of "putting up words to earn money" (*mazi zhengqian*). Using literature as a profitable channel to gain fame and wealth, Wang despised any noble causes associated with writing and willfully cast off the burden of historical reflection and social edification. To Wang, literature was just a "rice bowl" (*fanwan*)—a means of making a living, and a form of play. In this sense, Wang's new definition of the novel comes quite as a surprise. Yet there is one thing that remains the same. To Wang, a successful work has to be able to sell well and cater to the taste of the readers. This may give us a specific perspective to investigate the change of Wang. That is, the modification of Wang's agenda of literature is indicative of a wider transition of

the readers' expectations and their taste of consumption, which was closely affiliated with the transformation of mass imagination and collective memory in the 1990s.

Looking Very Beautiful is a semi-autobiographical work based on Wang's personal experiences. It recalls the kindergarten and primary school years of Fang Qiangqiang, a boy who is the childhood prototype of Fang Yan—one of the main "playing masters" in Wang's previous works. Like the protagonists in *Vicious Animals*, Fang lives in a military compound in Beijing. The story starts in 1961 when Fang is an ignorant toddler, and ends in 1966 when Fang is experiencing the beginning of the Cultural Revolution as a first-grade primary school student. Unlike *Vicious Animals*, in which the adult hero is pushed back to his past memories through an accidental encounter with a girl he knew in his adolescence, *Looking Very Beautiful* starts precisely from the past itself. Divided into twenty chapters, the novel devotes twelve chapters to record Fang's daily life in kindergarten in all its triviality and particularity. The last five chapters deal specifically with the first year of the Cultural Revolution, a year full of drama and excitement that highlights Fang's childhood memories.

Published in 1999, *Looking Very Beautiful* was an immediate market hit. In just in one month after its release, the novel had been reprinted three times and reached a record of 330,000 copies. However, the market success of the novel is mainly attributed to the salse strategy launched by the publisher, with partial thanks to Wang's established appeal based on the past works with which he feels "unsatisfied." After its release, Wang's new novel did not receive enthusiastic

responses from his expectant audience. Not only did literary critics pay little attention to this work, the common readers—the majority of whom are the faithful followers of Wang's writings—expressed their disappointment and disillusion. Wang himself, however, insists that he does not care about the negative comments since he primarily wrote the book for himself. Taking into consideration the substantial amount of royalties Wang received from this book, it is understandable why the discouraging responses did not bother Wang very much.

Still, questions arise when we contrast the different receptions of the two fictional works written by Wang in the 1990s. Comparing many aspects, the two works share more similarities than differences. Thematically, both stories deal with their main characters' experiences during their adolescence. In terms of content, both stories are mainly set in Beijing and the significant events happen in locations such as the military compound, school, and the streets. In both works, the narratives downplay many principle epochal themes and primarily focus on the daily lives and the psychological activities of the heroes. More importantly, the two works share a nostalgic mode in their retrospections of the Cultural Revolution. Underscoring the unreliability of personal memory to reconstruct a "real" reality, both works make an effort to recapture the "aura" of the past by associating memories with concrete material references in the form of fashion, game and play.

Beyond all these apparent resemblances, a divergence can be found in how specific cultural codes affiliated with play influence the protagonists in the process of their identity formation. If, in *Vicious Animals*, game and fashion are

underscored as distinctive faculties that seperate certain groups of adolescents from their peers to form a superiority complex, in *Looking Very Beautiful*, game and fashion are emphasized as a reflection of the mainstream culture of the era. This is especially the case when the story enters the phase of the Cultural Revolution. In the last five chapters of *Looking Very Beautiful*, Wang Shuo devotes substantial space to elaborate on the cultural resources characterizing Fang's childhood play during the first year of the Cultural Revolution. The cultural resources include dress codes, language habits, games and various forms of entertainment. However, rather than making social distinctions, play functions to homogenize the children, making them fit into the social environment complicit with the dominant ideologies of the era.

Some examples can illuminate this point. In the opening paragraphs of chapter sixteen, Wang presents a sketch portrait of his hero narrated in a first-person perspective. As a seven-year-old, Fang Qiangqiang has become a model student of Mao:

> I am a member of the Youth Pioneers, the class banner carrier, the study representative, the assistant leader of the Youth Pioneer Squadron, and the 'third king' (among the boys). My academic performance is excellent.
>
> I do not love my parents, barely have any idea of family, and am used to living a collective life. I wash my face, brush my teeth and fight for food by myself. You might say that I am very independent, very good at guessing other people's thoughts through their words and facial expressions, and calculating for my own benefits.
>
> I believe in communism. That thing is very concrete. It should be a mansion like a big shopping mall, which holds various restaurants, supermarkets and entertainment places (222).

In this self-revelation, Fang Qiangqiang was already a well-socialized child at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. In the first fifteen chapters, he grows up from an ignorant, naughty toddler to a kid who knows how to live a collective life with adult supervision. Upon entering the primary school, Fang is convinced that "nobody can exist independently. Everyone has to be dependent and rely on a more powerful person. It is indisputably correct that people have to be disciplined and follow the order level upon level, there is no exception for children…It is a fortune to have someone who disciplines you, which shows that you belong to this society" (182).

Based on this conviction, Fang enjoys his first school year as a willing student. When the Cultural Revolution begins, the first-grader Fang wears old, patched cotton clothes as all the other people do. Smart and "worldly-wise," Fang is actively involved in school activities and occupied by all forms of play. In the novel, Wang devotes a whole chapter to detail Fang's childhood games. Poker cards, cigarette boxes, glass balls and slingshots are all gizmos and stakes in fierce competitions. Hide-and-seek, swimming, film watching, name-calling and wrestling provide various forms of entertainment. In the novel, game and play incarnate specific generational memories since they are related to concrete historical and social referents. For instance, Fang and his fellows use particular military terms and imitate film dialogues in their daily conversation. Yet, in Fang's case, play is no longer an active appropriation of the cultural resources and an aggressive means of identity construction since it does not function to define a chosen lifestyle or an entrenched habit of consumption. If, in *Vicious Animals*, the

teenagers identify with certain rules, performances and codes associated with play in their efforts to build up their specific adolescent subjectivities, in *Looking Very Beautiful*, the children become involved in play mainly for fun and social assimilation with a dim sense of individuality.

A differentiation of the function of play here does not serve the purpose of negotiating and evaluating the level of socialization of Wang's fictional characters. It is noticeable that the hero in *Vicious Animals* also unconditionally believes in certain political propaganda and is inspired by the revolutionary ideal of "liberating the whole world." My concern leading to this discussion has less to do with a comment on the political identities and the self-images of Wang's pre-adult heroes. What struck me is not the various aspects of the "reality" of the past. Rather, I am interested in how different presentations of the coming-of-age experiences in this past interact with the present—more specifically—with the readers nowadays in relation to a prevalent cultural trend of nostalgic retrospection.

In the earlier discussion, I argued that *Vicious Animals* is well received and acclaimed as a text encoded with a sense of narcissism and social superiority sustained through generational memories substantialized by concrete historical and cultural references. In the story, the Cultural Revolution is remembered as an exciting period for teenagers to show off themselves in play. For these teenagers, being cool and trendy in the material aspects of social life is achieved through their active appropriation of limited economic and cultural resources. In this sense, *Vicious Animals* is a genealogical trace of the mental archives of the

present-day fashion pursuit, a reconstruction of the prehistory of the contemporary hip-hop culture. Being marginal in the historical turbulence thus represents a self-centered disinterestedness made possible by an advantaged social, class and familial background rather than a rebellious gesture of anti-socialization. Compared with *Vicious Animals*, *Looking Very Beautiful* becomes a matter-of-the-fact story that records history from the perspective of children. In this novel, when childhood games and various cultural resources are retraced from personal memories, they merely indicate the "aura" of a specific era and the assimilative force of a totalizing society. As a result, the detailed descriptions of Fang's childhood play lose their appeal when presented as residuals of the past severed from any connection to the present.

THE FUNCTIONS OF NOSTALGIA IN CONTEMPLATION

Distanced from his previous works with their storylines exclusively focusing on the present, the two fictional works written by Wang Shuo in the 1990s carry us back to a specific past. Both works express a nostalgic feeling toward pre-adulthood, a period during which children enjoy the privilege to play. In these narratives, the Cultural Revolution is portrayed as a big playground for the underage. While the grown-ups are occupied with political activities, the children are having fun in play. Making play the central event happening around his young characters during this time, Wang's two works appear as counternarratives contrasting a prevalent discourse that portrays the Cultural Revolution as a repressive and disoriented period for children.

Taking account of the different functions of play discussed in earlier sections, however, I would avoid rushing to the conclusion that Wang's nostalgic reconstruction of this history serves as a counter discourse to challenge an officially endorsed portrait of the Cultural Revolution. We must be reminded that the popularity of Wang's *Vicious Animals* chronologically followed the "Mao Zedong fever"—the commercialization of Mao in mass consumption. In Wang Shuo's novella and Jiang Wen's film, the Cultural Revolution is romanticized when certain aspects of youth culture in this period are nostalgically traced. The excavation of specific generational memories in the novella and the film not only caters to the social need of some young people to establish their generational identity, but also facilitates the formation of a mass imagination that views play as a privilege in a pragmatic society.

An investigation of the function of play in *Vicious Animals* shows that generational consciousness can be established upon identification with specific material and consumptive aspects of youth culture. If mutual recognition among adolescents in the past is based on being in the same social class, and having similar family backgrounds and communal experiences, a reader's endorsement of specific generational memories at present can be achieved through a common identification with particular cultural codes and a shared desire for being fashionable and cool. People do not even have to belong to the privileged few to cast a nostalgic gaze towards the "good old days." All they need to do is to discern a particular cultural trend, develop a taste towards it, and learn to appreciate what has been viewed as the "trendy." When young people immerse

themselves in a nostalgic mood to recall a not-necessarily-existent past, when they identify with an "imagined" personal history as the privileged few, what comes into view is not a desire to relive one's childhood, but a will to reshape one's adulthood according to the rules of the game of the present.

In this sense, the nostalgic narratives on the Cultural Revolution in Wang's *Vicious Animals* serve less as a tribute for the past than as a sample of fashion statements catering to the need of the present. Nostalgia thus becomes a longing for the things "yet-to-come," a symptom of mass consumption and a means of identity formation. In the case of *Looking Very Beautiful*, however, Wang's nostalgic recollections do not make a similar appeal to his young readers. When play does not function to present personal "differences," it becomes prosaic cultural archives of the past, interesting yet out-of-date.

In this sense, the nostalgic representation of the Cultural Revolution in historical coming-of-age stories by Wang Shuo are part of a wider cultural trend in which the cultural resources of a specific past are appropriated to shape the social and cultural landscape of the present. Rather than being an undesired burden, history finds a niche to fit into the life of the youth today. Even a traumatic history such as the Cultural Revolution can be marketed in the production of a cultural fashion. Of course, what makes this specific history "trendy" is not its historicity, but a strategic appropriation of the "stylistic" qualities of a past in its literary manifestation.

Yet one more question arises. If what matters is not an objective representation but a subjective reinvention of the reality, how can someone find

an “authentic” self from an unauthentic reconstruction of his or her past? What is the point of representing a specific history through imagination? In his study of Wang Shuo’s works, Yibing Huang argues that the literary representation of the Cultural Revolution can never be an aesthetic or stylistic problem, but is bound to be an ideological one (2002, 100). In this sense, when the Cultural Revolution is portrayed as a big playground, when Fang and his childhood friends view the political meetings as hilarious games, when “I” and “my” teenaged cohorts release “our” youthful passion in street fights and sexual adventures, what emerges is not only an alternative “reality” of this particular history, but also an effort to come to terms with an ambiguous past. When a once blasphemous Wang Shuo becomes sentimental and nostalgic in the 1990s, a pursuit for the historicity of the Cultural Revolution is further deferred. After nearly three decades of its demise, this magnificent event finally comes back. In Wang’s case, this history finds its refraction in the present only at the cost of a continuous suspension of its authenticity.

Chapter Four

Yu Hua and Wang Anyi: Constructing the Mundane Realities of the Cultural Revolution

THE DRAMATIZATION AND DEDRAMATIZATION OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN LITERATURE

In literature of the post-Mao era, many writers highlight the disastrous power of the Cultural Revolution to traumatize people and destroy their lives. For instance, recollecting his Cultural Revolution experiences, eminent writer Ba Jin depicts this period as violent, ridiculous, inhumane and nightmarish (Schwarcz 1998, 47). Similarly, naming his series of short stories *Shinian shiyi* [Ten years and ten cases of hysteria, 1988], senior writer Lin Jinlan tries to reflect a typical mentality of the persecuted who remember their Cultural Revolution experiences as disturbing, senseless, morbid and irrational (Meng Yue 1997, 236-48).

Considering the turmoil suffered by these writers in their own lives, their portrayal of the Cultural Revolution experiences as psychic cases or mental illusions serves specific therapeutic functions. On the one hand, highlighting the "unrealness" and "craziness" of their firsthand experiences is a means to dramatize this past. Not only do these tropes accentuate the sense of victimization of the persecuted, they also emphasize the irresistible force of a violent history. On the other hand, exposing this history as a period of absurdity ratifies the post-Mao era as an epoch of enlightenment, order and rationality. In other words, if the Cultural Revolution is remembered as a "nightmare," it is bound to end at the

moment of awakening rather than exist as an ongoing crisis that requires constant revoking.

The tendency to dramatize the destructive effects of the Cultural Revolution on people's lives resulted from a conviction of the disastrous nature of this history. Believing in the healing power of literature, many writers use writing as a means to release personal distress and to work through a collective trauma. In their works, historical and political factors are blamed as the essential causes of personal misfortunes and family tragedies. With loss and sacrifice turning out to be the prevalent themes, characters are often portrayed as powerless victims of their sociopolitical circumstances.[35]

Entering the 1990s, however, perspectives from which the Cultural Revolution experiences were told gradually shifted. In some literary works, political and historical factors no longer serve as determinative forces that make major influences on people's lives, as personal tragedies are caused by bad luck, unwise decisions, personality flaws, or fate. In other stories, with the logic of survival counteracting the destructive force of history, endurance becomes a shared theme. Consequently, the trope of victimization, which has dominated the post-Mao Cultural Revolution narratives, gradually loses its moral and psychological appeal.

Noting the emergence of endurance as an important theme in recent Cultural Revolution narratives, I want to point out that stories of ordinary people

[35] Gu Hua's *Furong zhen* [Hibiscus town, 1981] exemplifies this tendency. In this novel, the beautiful and innocent heroine, Hu Yuyin, loses everything—her true love, her reliable husband, her small yet thriving Tofu business, her reputation, dignity and personal freedom—to political persecution with no means to resist until her redemption comes with the fall of the "Gang of Four."

tenaciously surviving through this period are by no means found only in literature of the 1990s.[36] Thus, what differentiates some works in the 1990s from those of the previous decade is not the theme of endurance itself, but the surfacing of "everyday life" (*richang shenghuo*) as a powerful trope that challenges the idea of historical determinism so commonly found in certain dominant narratives on the Cultural Revolution.[37]

In this chapter, I study fictional works by Yu Hua and Wang Anyi, in which they portray the Cultural Revolution as a period of mundane life. Two characteristics make their works specifically distinguishable under my scrutiny. First, these writings share a tendency to dedramatize the manipulative power of the Cultural Revolution. Rather than describing the movement as a historical catastrophe that makes people the playthings of their sociopolitical circumstances, they "trivialize" this history by portraying it as a veiled background of mundane living. Second, characterized by meticulous descriptions of everyday life, these stories make the logic of living overpower sociopolitical factors in the formation of people's subjectivity. Since the political turmoil is relegated to a backdrop of ordinary life, senses of detachment and routine triumph over the emotions of devastation and discontinuity. Consequently, the question of blame either diffuses in a contemplation of the unpredictability of human fate, or disappears in

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[36] For instance, a novella by Wang Anyi, *Liushi* [The lapse of time, 1982], depicts the story of a family labeled as "capitalist" and "bourgeois" going through the trial of the Cultural Revolution. The heroine Ouyang Ruili enjoyed a life of ease and comfort before the movement. During the ten-year turmoil, she has to take on the responsibility of caring for the family both financially and emotionally. The task of meeting the basic needs of everyday life makes the heroine change from a luxuriating housewife to a strong homemaker.

[37] In my study, I use the term "everyday life" to refer to a mundane state of living defined mostly by the material condition rather than the political dimensions of social experience.

descriptions emphasizing people's ability to survive despite the hostile intervention of history.

Noticing their similar thematic traits, I also discern that these stories assign different values to mundane survival in relation to a violent history. Studying how various mundane "realities" of the Cultural Revolution are constructed in the recent works of Yu and Wang, I explore the changes in their approaches to representing this history. Moreover, I investigate the significance of these writings in the reorganization of Cultural Revolution memories and in the development of the writing careers of these two writers.

THE CULTURAL VALUE OF "EVERYDAY LIFE" IN 1990S CHINA

Compared with the idealistic 1980s, China in the 1990s has been described by Chen Xiaoming as a disorienting age in which people were overwhelmed by a sense of anxiety without seeing any vital force of creativity (1997, 1). If we define "vital force" in a less elitist sense than Chen does, China heading towards the end of the twentieth century was actually full of newly spurted zeal and life energies. Following Deng Xiaoping's "inspection tour of the South" (*nanxun*) in 1992, the already emerging market economy was officially endorsed and hailed as the new iron law of modernization. Once again, China entered a "new" historical phrase, a "Post-New Era" that readily embraced the trend of globalization. While the society gradually adapted to the accelerated pace of modernization, ordinary Chinese quickly grasped ideas such as entertainment and consumption. If history had never been exhaustible as the inspiration of literature and art, with the fast dissolution of the old belief system, the *historicity* of a specific past became

increasingly irrelevant to cultural consumers. Thanks to the rapid development of the cultural market, people could conveniently capture a "taste" of the past in TV melodramas, popular songs and best-sellers, as well as in historical writings and highbrow literature.

An observation made by Dai Jinhua, an acclaimed literary critic, sketches how history was remembered differently in the films of the post-Mao period. Dai points out that throughout the 1980s it was an abstract and conceptual "history" rather than "people" and "events" with concrete historical referents that became the central object of filmic narratives. Entering the 1990s, single incidents and specific individuals turned out to the focus of filmic representation (2000, 280). In fact, such a thematic shift not only characterized the production of film, but also emerged as a prevalent trend in various forms of literary creation. For instance, in the literature of the 1990s, many Cultural Revolution stories portray this history as an episode of ordinary life rather than a "nightmare" of dramatic sufferings. By doing this, these works put the mundane survival of ordinary people in the foreground as a counterforce to a violent history.

In the 1990s, "ordinary people" and "everyday life" became the central objects of literary representation.[38] The profit-oriented cultural enterprises were not the only organizations to align the direction of their cultural production to capture the theme of the era: the state-owned mainstream media and official cultural agencies also participated in the promotion of "ordinary people" and

[38] Rather than referring to a concrete, exclusively-defined social group in reality, the group of "ordinary people" was imaginably constructed as a social entity to refer to *putongren* or *laobaixing*. It is a mythos that is meaningful in certain discursive domains to serve specific discursive functions.

"everyday life" as powerful tropes defining the culture of the time. In October 1993, "Oriental Horizon" [*Dongfang shikong*],[39] China's most popular magazine-style documentary program, started running a ten-minute episode of *Jiangshu laobaixing ziji de gushi* [Telling the stories of ordinary people] in its weekday programs. It was the first time in China's media history that a TV program took ordinary life as the primary object of the screening. In every episode, the camera presents an on-the-spot record of the real life experience of ordinary people who face everyday routines or mundane problems. Since its release, the episode has received a high rating and become an essential attraction of the show.

Not only frequently appearing as the favorite themes in popular culture, "ordinary people" and "everyday life" also occupy noticeable positions in the literary imagination of acclaimed writers. Cultural phenomena such as the popularity of Wang Shuo among college students demonstrate the appeal of a street-smart living philosophy and the thriving life energy of plebeian culture. Wang exemplified this philosophy by repeatedly declaiming that his writing shows his belief that "humble people are the wisest; noble people are the stupidest" (Chen Pingyuan 1997a, 312). The naming of a literary school of "New Realism" by literary critics also shows how the representation of mundane life changed the landscape of contemporary Chinese literature (Chen Xiaoming 1997, 64-95).

Viewing the influence of mundane culture on literary representation, however, the literary critics show differences in not only their attitudes, but also

[39] Started on May 1, 1993, *Oriental Horizon* continues broadcasting to this day. Distinguished journalists on this program do insightful interviews with celebrities and give in-depth reports on important social events.

their "reference frames" when distinguishing this new cultural trend from its prehistory based on various theoretical, ideological and moral stands. For instance, Chen Xiaoming identifies the emergence of the mundanity theme as a manifestation of the "individualization" of literature (1997, 25). Zhang Dexiang and Fan Xing share an understanding that this phenomenon is a reflection of the secularization of culture in response to the de-centeredness of the political ideology and the retreat of intellectual elitism dominating the culture in the 1980s (Zhang 1994, 97; Fan 2001b, 27-8). My interest is not in justifying specific viewpoints in evaluating this trend. What fascinates me most is a central concept that has been constantly referred to yet remained ambiguous in its definition, namely, "everyday life" itself. As a result, I devote the following part of this chapter to discuss the different connotations of "everyday life" found in certain literary narratives. Following this, I explore both the significance and the problem of narratives that dedramatize a violent history such as the Cultural Revolution in its mundane "realities."

THE REPRESENTATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN LITERATURE AND THE EMERGENCE OF "MINJIAN IDEALISM"

In *National Past-Times*, Ann Anagnost insightfully points out that Chinese intellectuals faced an extremely difficult situation in maintaining the authority of their voice during and after 1989 since it appeared impossible for them to reach out and form an alliance with other social groups such as peasants, workers, independent entrepreneurs, and so forth (1997, 5). The power of the intellectuals was de-centered not only by the contestation of multiple constructions of cultural subjects, but also by the conflicts between the consecration of the values of

symbolic capital and economic capital. In 1990s China, many writers and intellectuals who had established their names in the "high culture fever" in the 1980s felt new challenges in their career development. For one thing, a name itself does not guarantee an ideal sales volume. Another dilemma appeared as the self-positioning of intellectuals in relation to the general public. In an era when the pedagogic role of the state and the intellectuals was profoundly devalued, how could writers situate themselves within the changing cultural landscape without sacrificing their spiritual concerns and critical consciousness?

Among literary critics studying contemporary Chinese literature, many have noticed the emergence of "everyday life" as a prominent trope in literary narratives (Fan Xing 2001b, 30; Chen Xiaoming 1997, 66-73). Not only does mundane reality become the central theme in literature of "New Realism," it also appears in the works of acclaimed avant-garde writers such as Yu Hua, Su Tong, and Ye Zhaoyan; of former educated youth writers like Zhang Chengzhi and Wang Anyi; and of established authors like Zhang Wei, Liu Heng, and Mo Yan. Struck by the prevalence of this phenomenon, Shanghai scholar Chen Sihe coins the term "minjian idealism" (*minjian lixiang zhuyi*) to discuss how certain writers take the narrative strategy of "telling the stories of ordinary people" to express their artistic ideals and spiritual pursuits (1999, 339).

To Chen, "minjian idealism" represents a new narrative position found in the writings of some middle-aged writers. More specifically, Chen argues that certain writers, frustrated by the failure of the elitist enlightenment discourses and the predominance of the profit-oriented living philosophy, turn to an alternative

"cultural space" to express their value judgment and aesthetic pursuit. This cultural space, in Chen's words, has always existed, yet has been covered up by repressive ruling ideologies and hegemonic cultures. More specifically, this cultural space refers to the "minjian culture" (*minjian wenhua*) concealed by mainstream culture while continuing to subsist in the everyday life of ordinary people (1997b, 277-78).

Ambiguously contrasting "minjian" to both "official" (*guangfang*) and "intellectual" (*zhishi fenzi*), Chen pictures the existence of an apolitical cultural space of the socially subordinated that provides the possibilities of popular intransigence in relation to established social orders. As a "bricolage" that addresses various cultural resources, "minjian culture" comprises dispersed traditional culture, commercialized urban culture and rural peasant culture (1997a, 171-72). At a specific historical moment like 1990s China, it is the existence of this "minjian culture" that provides an alternative discursive space for intellectuals to act as active cultural subjects under the lash of political detachment and economic pragmatism.

Whereas I agree with Chen's observation of the appearance of "everyday life of ordinary people" as a source of literary inspiration (1999, 339), I have a problem with viewing the manifestation of "minjian culture" in literature as the creative exploration of a *pre-existing* cultural space. My problem lies less in Chen's loose definition of "minjian culture" than in his overly positive view on the subversive nature of "minjian culture" in relation to dominant ideologies. In my view, a eulogized description of "everyday life" and "ordinary people" in

literature does little more than create a discursive space that associates elements of mundane culture with elite sectors to establish the writers themselves as powerful cultural subjects. Such an elitist appropriation of the culture of subordinated social formations is a common strategy applied by intellectuals to redefine their cultural identities and ideological positions in a changing cultural field.

Noticing that such a literary construction does not necessarily aim at empowering the economically disadvantaged and the socially subordinated at a discursive level, I also find that an emphasis on the power of everyday life manifested in literary creations does not always endow daily survival with positive meanings.[40] Having pointed this out, I acknowledge that in some Cultural Revolution stories produced in the 1990s, everyday life itself is represented as a source of power to defy the destructive force of a violent history. In these stories, what have been emphasized are the incidental occurrences and the material conditions of daily life rather than sociohistorical factors that serve as determinative forces to affect the lives of people.[41]

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[40] For instance, Jiang Yun's *Luori qingjie* [Plot of sunset, 1990] describes a commonly seen family tragedy in the Cultural Revolution. The brother of the heroine Xi Tong died in an armed factional fight after Xi, who was entrusted by their mother to watch the boy, let him go outside. In the story, however, the biggest tragedy is not the death of the boy, but the daily tortures suffered by Xi due to her mother's bitterness and Xi's indulgent self-blame. Jiang's work demonstrates that the act of living itself does not always produce strength for an individual to pull through hard times. Sometimes, the will to survive itself can be smashed in the challenge of daily sufferings.

[41] For instance, Ye Zhaoyan's *Guanyu cesuo* [About restroom, 1993] captures a farce in daily life and transforms it into a comedic story with a happy ending. The story happens in the mid-1970s at the time when the Cultural Revolution was about to end. The heroine Yang Hailing is a factory apprentice whose youth and beauty attract many young male coworkers. Yet her image is destroyed after an incident that causes her to wet her pants in front of the public. Humiliated and agitated, Yang takes every chance for a career change. Eventually, Yang passes the college entrance exam after the Cultural Revolution, becomes a government cadre, and leaves the embarrassing memories behind her. Ye's story represents an approach to dedramatize the Cultural

Such a tendency to trivialize the historical and political dimension of the Cultural Revolution in stories of the everyday is by no means a rare phenomenon in the 1990s. Chen Xiaoming points out that many fictional works labeled as "New Historicism" (*xin lishi zhuyi*) participate in the reorganization of historical memories to question dominant historical narratives that are legitimized in institutional history books (1997, 64-95). Chen is right in pointing out that the works of "New Historicism" not only challenge official history, but also redefine the law of history in relation to human life. Based on his observation, I want to single out certain Cultural Revolution stories written by Yu Hua and Wang Anyi as the objects of my study. I believe these stories deserve particular attention since it is hard to understand their social function and cultural significance under the umbrella of "New Historicism."

What differentiates the alternative narratives by Yu and Wang from those of "New Historicism" is that there is no official history of the Cultural Revolution to be confronted. After the collapse of the Cultural Revolution, it has been a delicate issue to condemn this historical period without denouncing the leadership of the CCP. A common strategy taken by writers is to locate the roots of evil or the causes of tragedy in the "Gang of Four" and their agents, or, more broadly, in the sociopolitical circumstance. Since these narratives often perpetuate people as powerless victims of their environment, an emphasis on the fortitudinous survival

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Revolution as an overwhelming force that holds direct and total control of people in daily life. In *About Restroom*, a shameful incident becomes the reason motivating the heroine to pursue a concrete goal in her life. Moreover, the humiliation and inconvenience suffered by Yang are not blamed for the specific sociopolitical environment in which she lived. In the story, the lack of public restrooms is presented as a social problem that continues to exist long after the Cultural Revolution. In this sense, the Cultural Revolution is not remembered as the worst period in which ordinary people have lived.

of people in the mundane “realities” of the Cultural Revolution has more to do with the creation of new identities beyond victim status than a rebuff of the “master narratives” constructed by a dominant history.

THE TRANSITION OF YU HUA AND HIS CULTURAL REVOLUTION NARRATIVES

The construction of a non-victim identity of people in Cultural Revolution narratives involves the dedramatization of the Cultural Revolution as a political and historical spectacle. One way to achieve this is to reinvent the symbolism of the Cultural Revolution as a trope of "everyday life.” In post-Mao literature, the Cultural Revolution has been labeled as an extreme example of political turmoil. In the history of the PRC, however, the Cultural Revolution chronologically followed a series of political campaigns launched by Mao to construct a socialist China. To people who lived through Mao’s years, political movements consisted of a significant part of their everyday life. For those burdened with a questionable family background and a suspicious class status, social discrimination and political persecution started long before the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

Rather than singling out the Cultural Revolution as a primary target of blame, Yu Hua’s two novels in the 1990s situate this period as a common episode in the political history of the PRC. In *To Live*, Fugui lives through both the Republican period and Mao’s years and suffers endless personal misfortunate and family tragedy, most of which happens before the Cultural Revolution. As the only child of a rich landlord, Fugui loses all his land and family belongings in a gambling rivalry several years before the CCP seizes power. Ironically, this bankruptcy saves him from being purged in the CCP’s “land reform,” and provids

him a questionable yet relatively secure class identity. During Mao's years, a series of political campaigns takes a heavy toll on Fugui's family. Fugui's wife Jiazhen falls ill in the exhausting labor of "backyard furnace movement" in the 1950s. His son, Youqing, dies in a medical incident due to the abusive use of power by the local officials. When the Cultural Revolution begins, Fugui is pretty much a man who knows his fatal thread. In Fugui's own words, this big political movement results in the city being in chaos, yet it only makes him sleep less well than before. What worries him and his wife is not the political movement, but the future of their deaf daughter, Fengxia. Consequently, Fengxia's marriage becomes the central event described in the novel on the background of the Cultural Revolution.

Another novel by Yu Hua under discussion is *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*. This story centers on the family life of Xu Sanguan, an ordinary textile mill worker who finds that he can conveniently earn money by selling his blood. Using the "blood money," Xu finds a wife and has three sons in five years. However, Xu quickly finds out that his eldest son, Yile, is the biological son of another man. Feeling humiliated, Xu takes his revenge on the boy and his wife, mistreating Yile and committing adultery with a female coworker. Despite all the bitterness, fights and quarrels, Xu continues to sell his blood to support a needy family. Surviving through several financial crises, Xu's family manages to overcome all the difficulties to see the good days that arrive after the Cultural Revolution.

Describing the mundane lives of ordinary people in a period of four decades, the two novels by Yu Hua in the 1990s are very different from his former works in terms of thematic content and language style. As a prolific writer, Yu Hua established his name as one of the most acclaimed and creative avant-garde writers in the late 1980s. Often characterized by tropes of violence, death and torture, Yu Hua's earlier works are regarded as stylistically and ideologically subversive in relation to conventional realistic narratives and are often read as metaphors of the historical cataclysm of the Cultural Revolution (Y. Zhao 1991b, 416-19; X. Tang 1993, 7-32; J. Wang 1993, 349-88; Zhang Yiwu 1988, 41-48; X. Yang 2002, 56-73).

Written in plain language and a realistic style, *To Live* marks an important transition in Yu's writing strategy. In his earlier career, Yu Hua, among many other avant-garde writers, wrote novels characterized by innovative narrative techniques and path-breaking themes. Open to possible interpretations based on "disinterested" language construction, their writings construct textual "realities" that help the readers to rid themselves of the conventional habit of reading and understanding only *one* kind of commonly shared picture of life. Compelled to face a world composed by a set of facts that has been described in languages without definite signifiers, the reader has to depend on his or her own reading to decode the picture of the "reality." For the readers who are used to viewing reality as something to be encountered and explained with certainty, what Yu Hua and his avant-garde peers offer is not only a total subversion of their former reading experiences, but also a challenge to their habitual ways of thinking.

In the late 1980s, Yu Hua strived to construct an alternative "truth" in his iconoclastic writings. Describing his own fiction as "hypocritical works" (*xuwei de zuopin*), Yu indicates that all the efforts he makes to write these stories are to reach "truthfulness" (*zhenshi*) to the greatest extent (1991, 205). In other words, what Yu Hua pursues is an individualistic expression of "reality" as a challenge to the "reality" presented in works of socialist realism. To Yu Hua, defined by common sense and preconceived explanations of the world, a conventional understanding and portrait of reality inevitably results in people's alienation of "truthfulness"—a state which represents the full complexity of a living reality and the rich region of human spirit that cannot be fully grasped and manifested by words of everyday use and expressions of collective consciousness.

If Yu Hua tried to break away from the tradition of socialist realism and attain a reliable expression of the whole complexity of reality in his "hypocritical" writings, he was at the same time distancing himself from a collective "we" to pursue an elitist sense of authenticity through his affirmation of the primacy of individuality over collectivity, and of the mode of expression over the object of representation. In this way, Yu legitimized the "truthful" aspect of the world *through the eyes of the writer*. In the 1990s, however, Yu Hua redefined the relationship between the existing "reality" with its concrete sociohistorical referents and his constructed world of art. In his recent works, the stories often center on the daily lives, in all their mundanities, of ordinary people. Claiming that "It is China's reality that nurtures my writings, giving me the hand and heartbeat I have when I am writing" (2002, 23), Yu Hua explains that ordinary

people and their stories of real-life happenings are the primary inspiration of his artistic creation. Noticing Yu Hua's transitions in language, style and thematic concerns, critics like Zhang Xiaofeng argue that the writer has eventually broken away from the influence of Western modernism and found his own inspiration in Chinese reality and domestic narrative traditions (2002, 108).

The focus of my study is not to discuss the cause and significance of Yu Hua's artistic reorientation. Nor am I going to give Yu Hua's two recent novels an overall close reading to decipher their symbolic connotation and aesthetic perception. What I am interested in is the Cultural Revolution narratives in the two works. If Yu Hua's earlier Cultural Revolution narratives provide allegoric retrospection of a traumatic history, his recent stories "detraumatize" this history in their naturalistic descriptions of mundane life. Both *To Live* and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* take issue with how the political turbulence intrudes on the everyday lives of people. Both stories cover nearly all the major political campaigns that took place during Mao's years, with the Cultural Revolution being portrayed as a single episode among many other historical events and political campaigns.

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION AS AN EPISODE OF EVERYDAY LIFE

In Yu Hua's recent two novels, it is undeniable that the lives of ordinary people are under the influence of their sociopolitical circumstances. However, both works avoid self-righteous accusation and sentimental indictment. Rather than portray the main characters as powerless victims of their environments, the stories show the survival strategies used by ordinary people to cope with

extraordinary travails. For instance, one of the most impressive and memorable scenes in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* is how Xu Sanguan spends his thirtieth birthday. The widely spread famine following the Great Leap Forward has deprived the family of any luxury except sweetened porridge. Despite this, Xu manages to "treat" every family member to a delicious dish upon request through his detailed and vivid description of the concrete cooking process.

In these narratives, humor is used as an element for the characters to mediate the tension between physical needs and a harsh reality. As ordinary people without much knowledge, money or many social connections, the two families are not the major targets of political movements. In their lives, meeting the daily needs of survival becomes their central concern, since a lack of money causes more troubles than the political pressure. In *To Live*, Fugui and Jiazhen worry that their family is too poor to find an ideal husband for their daughter. In *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, what pushes Xu Sanguan to the edge of his life is not the humiliation suffered by the whole family due to his wife's tarnished reputation, but their desperate financial situation, which forces him to oversell his blood. In these narratives, people's everyday lives are more closely associated with their material conditions than their historical and political settings. As a result, family relations and the formation of individual identities are often regulated by practical living conditions of daily life rather than by political education and ideological permeation.

In this respect, Yu Hua's two recent novels redefine the role played by history in the lives of ordinary people. During Mao's years, numerous political

campaigns were launched to transform people through the internalization of revolutionary consciousness in revolutionary practices. In his indoctrination, Mao constantly called for young people to fiercely attack both the feudal tradition and the bourgeois ways of thinking. In revolutionary art and literature, a plain and simple lifestyle was promoted as a trait of the proletariat class, and a careless attitude towards the material condition of everyday life often served as a distinguishable mark to differentiate the true revolutionaries from the politically "backward."

In *To Live*, however, Yu Hua describes how Mao's political ideologies failed to change people's view of the significance of material life. Fugui's son-in-law Er'xi is a porter, an unquestionable member of the politically "advanced" working class. Yet, in order to please his in-laws and his bride, Er'xi borrows a huge amount of money to hold a big wedding ceremony in Fugui's village. In the novel, Yu Hua depicts the wedding scenes from Fugui's perspective:

> As soon as he entered the village, Er'xi unpacked two cartons of cigarettes. Squeezing the cigarettes into the hands of village men right at the moment he met them, (Er'xi) was constantly saying:
>
> "A lot of thanks. A lot of thanks."
>
> When the other families in the village held their weddings, the best cigarette they smoked was no better than a "Feima." Yet Er'xi was giving away whole packs of "Daqianmen." This gesture makes all the other families seem inferior (152).

Here, the narratives show that the continuous ideological edification and intensive revolutionary indoctrination fail to change the value judgment of ordinary people who depend on money to bring them "face" and prestige in their local community. Poor and deaf, Fengxia has been the primary target of teasing

and bullying. Er'xi, who has an askew neck, is also vulnerable to social discrimination. After their luxurious wedding, however, both Fugui's family and the new couple earn respect from the local villagers. In the story, the wedding becomes the topic of talk in the village for many years. Whenever there are girls married out, villagers would refer to Fengxia's wedding as a standard.

That the logic of living overpowers the influence of the sociopolitical environment in the formation of the subjective identities of ordinary people is also seen in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*. During the Cultural Revolution, young people were called by Mao to challenge authorities and rebel against traditions. One of Mao's agendas was to destroy familial hierarchy. In *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, however, Xu Sanguan gradually builds up a deep emotional bond with Yile, his wife's son by another man. After being sent down to the countryside, Yile becomes seriously ill. In order to get enough money to pay for Yile's medical bills, Xu Sanguan risks his life by selling his own blood.

The critical moment that consolidates the relationship between Xu Sanguan and Yile is presented in a rather tragicomic scene. During the Cultural Revolution, Xu Sanguan was forced to hold a "criticism meeting" at home to help his wife, Xu Yulan, who had been labeled as a "prostitute" for her premarital relationship with He Xiaoyong, Yile's biological father. After Xu Yulan confesses her "mistake," Xu Sanguan asks their three sons to voice their opinions in order to "help" their mother. Yile expresses his hatred towards his biological father and his mother. His accusation, however, is interrupted by Xu Sanguan. Later, the story goes as follows:

> At this time Yile says: “I still haven’t finished my words just now…”
>
> Xu Sanguan looks at Yile very unpleasantly: “What do you still have to say?”
>
> Yile looks at Xu Sanguan and says: “Just now I talked about whom I hate the most. I also have the one whom I love the most. The one I love the most is certainly the great leader Chairman Mao. The second one I love the most…”
>
> Yile looks at Xu Sanguan and says: “…is you.”
>
> Hearing Yile saying this, Xu Sanguan looks at Yile without moving his eyes. After a while, his tears flow out, he says to Xu Yulan:
>
> “Who said Yile is not my son?” (216)

In this scene, Yile shows his utmost attachment to Xu Sanguan, and Xu accepts Yile as his very own son. Despite the pressures imposed by their environment, Xu Sanguan and Yile deny a nominal father-son relationship to become a real family based on their mutual commitment. Moreover, Yile makes Xu Sanguan (his foster father) stand right next to Chairman Mao (the symbolic father of the nation). A sense of irony arises when such an emotional moment happens during a “criticism meeting” that aims to challenge parental authority and destabilize family structure—two revolutionary agendas promoted by Mao himself. What has been shown here is how the experiences of everyday life influence the interpersonal relationship, since what makes Yile express his love to Xu Sanguan is the reality that Xu, although mistreating him on several occasions, continues to take care of him in daily life. By emphasizing the apolitical and material aspect of ordinary life, Yu’s novels challenge a received narrative pattern

that emphasizes the power of political circumstance in transforming people's ways of thinking.

In addition to raising this challenge, Yu Hua's stories also question the function of political turmoil in forming and perpetuating the victim identity of people. At the end of *To Live*, Fugui lives a peaceful life in the countryside, accompanied by an aged ox bearing his love to all his deceased family members. In *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant,* Xu Sanguan eventually sees the coming of the good days. After the Cultural Revolution, all three of his sons are married and have their own families. In the final scene of the story, Xu Sanguan enjoys his favorite dish and yellow wine for the first time without having to sell his blood in order to buy them. In these narratives, Yu Hua makes the reality of survival counteract the destructive force of history. When history becomes so unpredictable and incomprehensible to ordinary people, daily survival itself becomes a means of self-representation.

ENDURANCE: A FORCE OF POPULAR RESISTANCE, AND, "A VIRTUE OF CHINESE PEOPLE?"

In the two novels discussed above, Yu Hua presents endurance as a coping strategy of ordinary people to accept misfortune and to protect their existence. In *To Live,* Fugui is not portrayed as a desperate loner haunted by all his past sufferings. After losing all his loved ones, Fugui appears as an old, wise man with a gentle heart and a sense of humor. In *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant,* Xu Sanguan and his family encounter continuous economic and family problems. Yet their ability to endure both physical hardship and circumstantial pressures makes the very act of endurance itself a denial of the destructive power of history. In this

respect, endurance can be viewed as a force of popular resistance, which produces social subjects who persevere and witness a violent history.

If, in the two novels, endurance appears as a living philosophy of ordinary people whose acts of survival are deeply embedded in their specific sociohistorical settings, problems arise when Yu Hua explains "endurance" as a transcendental human virtue. In his interview with Michael Standaert, Yu Hua states, "the theme which is central in much of my writing is that I've realized that the Chinese people can overcome any difficulty presented to them…I believe that whatever life you offer to the Chinese, they will be able to deal with it…And since that time things are getting better, so it doesn't strike the majority that they should do anything more than wait, endure, and it will get better" (Standaert 2003). In his words, endurance becomes not only a means of individual perseverance, but also an ethical virtue of the Chinese people.

Making endurance an admirable national character of the Chinese, Yu's explanation implies that a life journey of endurance can be rewarded by a happy ending, as traumatic experiences are common episodes of an ongoing tragicomedy of suffering and surviving. In this respect, endurance can be used as an omnipotent solution to all kinds of substantial straits. In Yu's own reflections, *To Live* moves common readers to tears and inspires young people to give their aging parents new respect. A young man who is jobless after college and plans to commit suicide changes his mind after reading the novel since he realizes that people who are much worse-off than himself can still manage to survive (Standaert 2003). From this example, we can see how a story of endurance can be

read as a survival manual for people to help them cope with an unsatisfying present. Telling the stories of endurance and survival, Yu's alternative narratives on the Cultural Revolution question a thematic prototype that portrays people as victims who are helplessly manipulated by this history. Promoting endurance as a transcendental virtue, however, Yu seems less aware of the danger that his stories can be used as cheap psychiatry to ease immediate life anxieties, which embroils his works in the possibility of dehistoricizing a major traumatic event such as the Cultural Revolution, which is crucial in constructing specific ethical identities.

WANG ANYI: "REALITY" AS THE OBJECT OF AESTHETIC CONTEMPLATION

In the post-Mao period, Wang Anyi is one of the most persistent and influential writers. Starting to publish in the early 1980s, Wang has shown her talent and creativity in her prolific writings. Some of Wang's earlier works are regarded as examples of "educated youth literature" (*zhiqing wenxue*) and "root-seeking fiction." Others have been discussed from a feminist perspective for their focus on women's issues. However, Wang is not labeled as a writer for a specific literary school. Throughout the 1980s, Wang's writings constantly changed in terms of subject matter and aesthetic orientation.

It was in the early 1990s that Wang articulated the principles guiding her future writings. In *Wode xiaoshuo guan* [My view on fiction, 1996], Wang claims that she aims at writing works without typical circumstances and typical characters, without too many materials, without a distinctive language style, and without uniqueness. From her own statements, we can detect that Wang is trying to distinguish her literary creations from two other approaches to writing. One is

the tradition of "socialist realism" that emphasizes the sociopolitical value of literature through its representation of typical characters in typical circumstances. The other is the practice of the "avant-garde" writers who established their names through language experimentation and narrative innovation in the late 1980s. These two approaches represent different views on the function of literature and different strategies for the self-positioning of the writers. The former aims to make literature a "reflection" of social "reality." Consequently, literature is politicized as a tool of socialization, which guarantees the writer gains both professional recognition and social influence. The latter can be viewed as an attempt to dissociate literature from politics. Emphasizing the significance of language and style in defining the value of literature, avant-garde writers weigh the symbolic value of writing over its social reception to distinguish themselves as "professional" writers.

In the early 1990s, both literature of "socialist realism" and of the avant-garde faced new challenges when the changing reality redefined the role played by writers in society. With the decrease of the social influence of serious literature, many writers and critics promote "individualized writing" (*gerenhua xiezuo*)—the revelation of personal experience and private feeling—as a means to sustain the autonomy of literature.

As a well-acclaimed writer, Wang Anyi realizes the limits of both a "reflective" representation and an experimental construction of "reality" in literature. To Wang, the "reality" in literature is neither a mirror image of the outside world, nor a manifestation of pure imagination. Moreover, as an artistic

practice, writing bears significance more than securing a niche of self-expression. Distancing herself from traditional realistic writers, Wang devalues the "representative" function of literature and highlights the subjective nature of her writing. Nonetheless, Wang does not turn away from social reality itself, but views it as a source of her literary creation. Like Yu Hua, Wang is a professional writer who studies the techniques of writing and the reality created by them. Yet, if to Yu Hua the reality in literature is distinguishable for its expressive details and emotional impacts that make drama out of routine (Yu Hua 2004), Wang Anyi defines reality in her writing as a "world of the mind" (*xinling shijie*) that distances itself from the material world outside.[42]

In this sense, "reality" as a sociohistorical existence becomes both the inspiration and the hindrance to Wang's writing. That is, Wang assigns herself the task of building up an imagined "reality" with the materials provided by the outside world. At the same time, she argues that this world of the mind is supposed to process aesthetic qualities that distinguish it from social reality (1997, 21-23). Artistic creation thus becomes a practice of rationalized myth-making. To Wang, the distance between art and reality is not created through a total "withdrawal of the real," but via a creative construction of an imagined world in which reality itself is presented in a subjective mode, appreciated as an art form, and evaluated by its aesthetic value rather than its social and historical significance.

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[42] In the early 1990s, Wang offered a one-semester course at Fudan University called "What is Fiction?" Her lecture notes were later published as a book entitled *Xinling shijie* [The world of the mind, 1997]. In the first chapter of the book, Wang discusses the relationship between the reality in literature and the reality in actual life.

What might happen when a socially, economically and culturally specific "reality" becomes the object of aesthetic contemplation in literature? Moreover, how does the created "reality" of a specific history, characterized by its own constructedness, negotiate with the "dominant narratives" of this past? To discuss these questions, I now analyze Wang's recent Cultural Revolution narratives that construct an alternative "reality" of this history in their detailed descriptions of everyday life.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF WANG ANYI'S CULTURAL REVOLUTION NARRATIVES

As a writer who grounds her artistic creation in subjective imagination and personal experiences, Wang has written several stories taking the Cultural Revolution as their background. Like many of her peers, Wang was "sent down" to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. As a former educated youth, the sent-down experiences have become a continuous inspiration in Wang's writing career.

In the 1980s, the Cultural Revolution stories told by Wang can be tracked as follows. Her early works are mostly autobiographical descriptions of the lives of the former educated youths after they return to the city. After that, Wang published her famous "Love Trilogy," in which she touches on the taboo topics of sex and desire. Following this, Wang published the controversial novella *A Century on a Hillock,* a story about the sexual relationship between a sent-down girl and a local cadre. Wang's most acclaimed work so far, in which the Cultural Revolution occupies considerable space, is *Shushu de gushi* [Our uncle's story]. Published in 1990, this novella traces the life of a former "Rightist" who goes

through a series of political campaigns during Mao's years, gains prestige and status through his writings after the Cultural Revolution, yet still faces unsolvable problems left from his dreadful past.

After *Our Uncle's Story*, Wang's Cultural Revolution narratives show a departure from her earlier writings. In her early stories, Wang, like many other writers, describes how this history disrupts routine and changes the fate of ordinary people in dramatic ways. Starting from the mid-1990s, however, Wang published a series of fictional works in which this history is presented in meticulous descriptions of everyday life that sustains the logic of living. In fact, "trivialized narration" (*suosui xushi*) has always been a distinguishable characteristic of Wang's writings. What strikes me most in some of her recent works is not her detailed depictions of ordinary life, but her efforts to assign aesthetic value to the everyday life of the socially subordinated such as peasants and average city dwellers.

Many literary critics have noticed this transition and provided their explanations to this phenomenon from different perspectives. For instance, David Der-wei Wang points out that Wang Anyi's recent works are characterized by "aesthetics of sorrow" (*youshang de meixue*). Drawing on Freud's theory of trauma and mourning, David Wang emphasizes that a melancholic mode dominating Wang Anyi's narratives translates the painstaking process of living through historical catastrophe into a sad, yet common episode of individual survival (1998, ix-x). Exploring from the perspective of memory and nostalgia, Ban Wang reads Wang's meticulous description of the material aspects of

everyday life as a critical commentary on both a homogenous history of revolutionary modernity and a current social condition of capitalist globalization (2002, 671-88). Xu Deming argues that Wang's recent narratives constitute a "discourse of the everyman/woman" (*zhongsheng huayu*), which aims to keep the cultural essence of a "minjian world" (*minjian shijie*) as an alternative to the thinking frame of modernization (2001, 35-41). Studying Wang's change from the viewpoint of stylistics, Chen Sihe identifies Wang's trivialized narration of everyday life as a coping strategy to respond to the challenge of essay-style writings that dominated the literary production in the 1990s (1998, 171-72).

Sharing a similar interest in Wang's recent transition, I focus on studying how Wang's recent Cultural Revolution narratives construct a mundane "reality" of the Cultural Revolution in which the social and cultural differences between various groups of people are tentatively mediated in their shared respect for the logic of mundane survival. The works under my scrutiny are *Art Troupe* and *The Era of Seclusion*. Both novellas tell the stories of sent-down intellectuals during this ten-year historical turbulence.

BEYOND POPULISM

In the two stories, Wang portrays the sent-down life of the educated class during the Cultural Revolution in a gentle, nostalgic mood. *Art Troupe* depicts "our" lives during the Cultural Revolution in a county-level theater troupe. Composed by actors with different social backgrounds and various artistic talents, "our" art troupe becomes a safe haven that provides both protection and a basic livelihood for people during a chaotic era. Similarly, *The Era of Seclusion*

portrays the life of the educated youths and the sent-down intellectuals among local peasants and country folk. Rather than suffering from physical hardship and social discrimination, the educated people are accepted by the locals and treated with tolerance, understanding and appreciation.

In the two works, Wang Anyi uses first-person narrative style yet makes the omniscient narrator "I" speak on behalf of "us"—the actors in *Art Troupe* or the educated youths in *The Era of Seclusion*—to retrace "our" Cultural Revolution experiences. Lack of central characters and coherent plots to compose dramatic events, the stories are characterized by detailed descriptions of the everyday life of "us." Forced to relocate during the Cultural Revolution, "we" find comfort in the continuity of everyday life, befriending each other and the locals. What bonds "us" all together is the logic of living that remains the same despite all the sociopolitical changes, which makes the sent-down experience not only bearable, but also the object of nostalgic retrospection.

In post-Mao literature, it is common for a writer to make his or her characters give credit to the remote places they were sent to during the Cultural Revolution by claiming that disadvantaged circumstances helped make them physically and emotionally stronger than before. It is also not unusual for writers of former "Rightist" and educated youth to show gratitude to the locals who treated them nicely during their years of rustication. Often characterized by a glorification of the sufferings endured by the intellectuals and a romanticized exaltation of the virtues of laboring people, these works are under the influence of "populism" (*mincui zhuyi*), a trend of thought originating from Russia in the late

nineteenth century and introduced in China during the May Fourth period (Fan Xing 2001a). Although the content of populism kept changing and evolving in China's context, a basic idea of this thought claims that intellectuals should unite themselves with the laboring people by going to the countryside and working with and learning from the locals, through which the worldview of the educated class can be transformed.

Different from these works, Wang Anyi's Cultural Revolution narratives give a positive portrait of the sent-down life of the educated class, yet she does not intend to idolize the locals as the examples of the intellectuals, nor does she idealize the rustication experience as a process of character building. What Wang highlights in her stories is a specific social space "existing" during the Cultural Revolution that mingled the educated people with other social groups. Presenting such an imagined mundane "reality" of the Cultural Revolution, Wang finds that the Cultural Revolution can be "detraumatized" when the mundane living itself becomes the object of aesthetic contemplation.

THE FORCE OF EVERYDAY LIFE

In her earlier works, Wang Anyi held a negative view of her Cultural Revolution experiences. She also showed a critical attitude towards peasant culture. In a talk with Chen Sihe, Wang stated that "in the Jianghuai river basin where I was 'sent down,' the peasants have pretty much been 'contaminated' by commercial economy. Therefore during the two years I was in the village, few peasants treated me truly well. Sometimes they seemed to treat you well, but (this was) for their own benefit. (I) cannot say they were very bad, but (they) surely did

not have qualities such as unselfishness and open-mindedness…Later on I joined an art troupe. I still felt bored, (I) did not know what to do after (I) got up in the morning. This was very difficult to endure" (1991, 590-91).

From her words, we can see that Wang was deeply disappointed by her sent-down experiences. To Wang, her rustication days as an educated youth symbolize a "rupture" in her life, a deviant period in which she was removed from her comfort zone and resettled into another world. As a result, Wang's early Cultural Revolution narratives are characterized by a sense of discontinuity, a mode of disorientation that requires the main characters to make special efforts to adjust to their new environment. For instance, in Wang's autobiographical novel *Jishi yu xugou* [Reality and fabrication, 1993], "I" is very frustrated by the sent-down life in the village and tries every means to get a step closer to Shanghai. In a word, Wang's past Cultural Revolution narratives had made this history a period of dislocation of the educated people in which they suffered both the physical hardship and psychological torment.

Given the above observation, Wang's two stories published in the late 1990s form a sharp contrast to her earlier works that paint a negative portrait of the sent-down life of the educated class. In her recent works, history is not defined by big events, but by the continuity of everyday life. That is, the Cultural Revolution makes the educated class become a displaced social group, yet it also provides an opportunity for them to interact with other social groups and to appreciate the material aspects of everyday life. It is in a process of tenacious survival that the educated people—represented in an abstract yet all-

encompassing “we” in Wang’s narration—get comforts and learn valuable life lessons.

If Wang’s recent Cultural Revolution stories present this history in the background of everyday life, living a mundane life itself is represented as a means of self-preservation to counterforce a disadvantaged environment. In *Art Troupe*, “we” clearly realize that the working and living condition in “our” small art troupe is far from ideal. The actors keep complaining about the low wages, the crowded lodge, the complicated interpersonal relationships, the lack of training and the scarce opportunities for performance. Although the harsh reality unsympathetically frustrates people’s longing for a promising future, the art troupe still attracts people from various social backgrounds and holds them in its care in a chaotic era. In “our” art troupe, local opera performers, college-trained actors, persecuted artists, inexperienced apprentices and amateur actors compose a micro-plebeian society. When making a basic livelihood becomes the primary concern of people, the cultural disparities between different social groups become less prominent in the daily routine of obtaining food, clothing, housing and transport. After this work, Wang published *The Era of Seclusion*. In this later work, Wang goes a step further to “detraumatize” the sent-down experiences of the intellectuals. What is prominent about this work is the portrayal of an ideal “social space” that mediates rather than perpetuates the cultural and social differences between the sent-down intellectuals and the locals, which makes the mundane survival itself the object of aesthetic contemplation.

MUNDANE LIFE AS THE OBJECT OF AESTHETIC CONTEMPLATION

Discussing the construction of an imagined "social space" in Wang's works, I identify "social space" as the space of social positions and the space of lifestyles that classify people into different social groups according to the economic and cultural capital they possess. In *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu differentiates "social space" from "class" since the latter is mostly defined by material properties in Marxist theory. To Bourdieu, a social space categorizes its members according to not only their economic conditions, but also their cultural practices (1984, 169-70). In Bourdieu's analysis, people with a high volume of economic and cultural capital, such as the bourgeoisie, prefer to appreciate art with transcendental values, while people with less economic and cultural capital are more interested in the mundane functions of culture (344-45). In other words, the formation of different social spaces defined by various social positions, stratified lifestyles and distinguishable cultural preferences functions to perpetuate social distinction, maintain social order and produce the hierarchical structure of society.

If Bourdieu's theory of social space reveals how people are divided into various social groups based on the economic and cultural capital they process in order to manifest social differences, Wang Anyi creates a social space of heterogeneity that reconciles rather than manifests social distinctions. In *The Era of Seclusion*, such a social space appeared during the Cultural Revolution when some sent-down intellectuals lived an ordinary life among the locals. The story is divided into two parts: the first part describes the lives of several sent-down

doctors in Daliu Village, and the second part recalls the cultural activities of a group of educated youth in Sanhe County. In this story, Wang describes how the local peasants interact with the sent-down doctors, how the local circumstances create a niche for cultural diversity, through which the value of mundane life is revealed to "us."

In the story, the narrator "I" redresses "my" past prejudge toward the sent-down experiences as follows:

> Only when I walk away from the barren fate of my youth, setting aside my own feelings of gratitude and resentment, and being able to calmly reconsider the village to which I was "sent down" and the peasants there, I find out that the peasants indeed have an inborn artistic temperament. They have the capacity to appreciate people who are different from them. They have the ability to criticize their environment and the people living among them. Moreover, they have a gift to distinguish the real uniqueness from diverse and confused phenomena (11).

Living among peasants like this, the sent-down doctors in Daliu Village are tolerantly accepted by the locals. According to their different professional status, personal disposition, living ability and family situation, the villagers treat them with different attitudes yet consistently offer their friendship to them. They respect Dr. Zhang, who has a close family, a husband working as a local official, and three adorable children. They show sympathy to Dr. Yu, who has to take care of her dispirited "Rightist" husband and her insensible kids. They feel honored and show courteousness when Dr. Zhang and her family visit them. They befriend Dr. Yu, share their feelings with her and help her to do household chores. Yet, it is their attitude towards Dr. Huang that defines their "artistic temperament" and makes "I" realize the aesthetic judgment of the peasants.

A famous doctor who leaves his family in the city, Dr. Huang lives an awkward life in the countryside since he does not know how to take care of himself in daily life. Compared with other doctors who are more or less able to adjust to rural life, Dr. Huang appears as such an "outsider" in the village that the locals can easily recognize him through the way he talks, walks, sits and does laundry. Yet the peasants show deep respect and profound tolerance to Dr. Huang, treating him as a spoiled child. They revere him for his professional talent and feel sorry for him for his loneliness and messy livelihood. They are especially touched by a particular disposition possessed by Dr. Huang, which is "weak, lonely, sad and docile" (10).

In the story, Wang explains why the villagers have a soft spot for Dr. Huang. As the author indicates, in a materially deprived circumstance, the peasants have learned to appreciate anything that can bring pleasure into their mind. When Dr. Huang appears in the village, he brings with him an aura composed of "knowledge, learning, refined personality, child-like innocence, and the sadness of life" (12). To the villagers, Dr. Huang is more like a piece of artistic work than a real doctor. When the alternative existence of Dr. Huang becomes the object of aesthetic contemplation of the locals, the visible disparities between him and the villagers in terms of lifestyle and cultural background are resolved into tolerance, appreciation and peaceful coexistence.

If Daliu Village accepts and protects a sent-down doctor who brings them not only practical help but also aesthetic satisfaction, Sanhe County provides a land of peace far from the maddening crowd for the educated people to enjoy

relative cultural freedom. In *The Era of Seclusion*, Sanhe County emerges as an isolated small town with limited resources and few attractions. Yet, it provides a relatively tolerant circumstance for "us"—a group of educated youths—to engage in various cultural activities. In an agricultural machine factory, "we" interact with temperamentally compatible college graduates and fellow peers. In the Sanhe County Middle School, "we" discover teachers with complex social backgrounds and legendary experiences.

In Wang's narratives, the remoteness and provinciality of Sanhe County provide an ideal environment that protects the intellectuals from aggravated political persecutions and facilitates "our" underground cultural activities. At the end of the novella, Wang concludes, in a repressive era:

> "when the repelled culture and slaughtered knowledge retreated to here, they congregated and became even more prominent and striking than (they were) in normal times. In fact, it is in a creviced place like this that energy is conserved and strength is built up. They have an unchangeable nature. It is this unchangingness that enables the preservation of the good quality and training that our humankind has accumulated for a long time, (which makes) our heritance secure, avoiding from vanishing" (27).

It is rather obscure, however, to define the "unchangingness" cherished so much by Wang. In her story, Wang describes this "unchangingness" more as a tempo-spatial condition than as a specific cultural heritage. In *Art Troupe*, the political turbulence cannot change the material aspects of daily living. In *The Era of Seclusion*, what remains undisturbed in the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution are the rural ethic, rustic lifestyle, provincial environment and the routine of everyday life. To Wang, these "unchanged" aspects of mundane life ensure individual survival and overpower the outside chaos in the formation of subjective

identities of ordinary people. In her narratives, dramatic historical events such as the rustication movement brings different social groups together, making them live in a shared disadvantaged environment, and enabling them to interact in a way that crosses cultural boundaries. It is in this "reality" that the educated people learn that peasants are also equipped with aesthetic judgment and "artistic temperament." It is also through the creation of such a "reality" that Wang revokes her own sent-down memories and makes mundane living itself the object of aesthetic contemplation.

In this sense, Wang's Cultural Revolution stories are neither a nostalgic retrieval of the unrepentant youth nor a provocative revelation of the past sufferings. What I found here is the creation of "a world of the mind" that has more to do with artistic imagination than objective fact searching. In this "world of the mind," the Cultural Revolution is trivialized in meticulous descriptions of mundane life, which makes the rustication experience a memorable life phase of learning and surviving. Moreover, in Wang's narrative construction, the historical catastrophe is not able to break the "unchangingness" sustaining the continuity of everyday life. The forced integration of different social groups does not perpetuate the cultural difference but makes the educated class and the commoners appreciate each other in the context of mundane living. In Wang's stories, when the destructive power of the Cultural Revolution is counteracted in the unfolding of everyday life, the manipulative power of history in general is also confronted in a "world of the mind" that declaims its own independency.

HISTORY AND "EVERYDAY LIFE" AS MYTH-MAKING

Although Wang's Cultural Revolution narratives challenge the historical determinism reflected in many other stories about this period, it is questionable to identify these writings as a discursive construction of ordinary people, who are powerful historical agents holding their own fate. As I have mentioned before, what makes Wang's recent Cultural Revolution stories different is not her positive descriptions on the sent-down experiences. In other words, it is not the first time in the rustication stories that the locals appear to be open-minded, the ordinary life teaches valuable lessons, and the disadvantaged time provides a chance for character building. What distinguishes Wang's works from those of the others is her insistence on the "constructed" nature of her writings. In *The World of the Mind*, Wang Anyi strives to dissociate artistic creation and appreciation from serving any social functions. Discussing several literary works from both China and the West, Wang states that artistic creation is about "constructing a superior state. The value of this state is not its authenticity and practical use. It just exists as a human ideal, a divine sphere of the mankind" (1997, 21). In this sense, Wang emphasizes the autonomy of artistic creation that refuses to be appropriated by ideological practice and the construction of a collective discourse.

Taking this into consideration, it makes sense for Wang to declare artistic autonomy by making the mundane "realities" of the Cultural Revolution the objects of aesthetic contemplation. If an elite taste of artistic independence requires the separation of the aesthetic from the social, Wang shows her elitist stance by appreciating the life of the socially subordinated and materially

disadvantaged from an artistic perspective. In a society that increasingly marginalizes the peasant culture and the provincial lifestyle as a sign of backwardness, in a market system that continuously produces cultural and social stratifications, Wang refers to mundane life as a site where specific cultural essences are preserved, the elite status of the intellectuals is recognized, and the relationships between various social groups are mediated. Yet, such an idealistic "minjian milieu" articulated in Wang's recent Cultural Revolution stories is nothing more than a myth-making. If the creation of such an imagined "reality" fulfills the artistic ideal of Wang, the past remains ambiguous, and everyday present life goes on with its own logic, which creates the conditions for the formation of particular differences in the constitution of hierarchized social order.

Conclusion

The Cultural Revolution as a political event ended in 1976. Yet, the proliferation of the Cultural Revolution narratives towards the end of the twentieth century in China tells us that this history is still very much with us. Although the critiques of the Cultural Revolution vary in both intensity and thrust, this ten-year period is undeniably a tarnished page in the history of twentieth-century China. The traumatic experiences of the Cultural Revolution have generated both the urge to repress memories associated with that period and the desire to give meanings to the event through memories. As a result, despite the incessant official censorship of the Cultural Revolution discussion, various attempts to remember this history appeared in private and public narratives and offered diverse understandings of this specific past.

In the first decade of the post-Mao period, dominant narratives on the Cultural Revolution portray Chinese people as innocent victims, bound together as a national community by a communal "nightmare." Establishing a group of people identified as "trauma survivors," these narratives construct a collective memory of this history in order to confine the remembrance of a traumatic past. More often than not, their representations of the historical trauma function as a denial rather than a revelation of past violence, not only because trauma is by nature incomprehensible and anti-representational in a psychological sense (Kaplan and Wang 2004, 3-5), but also because their selective use of memory releases certain historical "facts" at the cost of silencing others.

If working through an undesirable past in a collective memory has become the primary concern in the Cultural Revolution narratives after 1976, entering the 1990s, there was a tendency for the individuals to revisit this past to "redeem" their personal memories of this history. Countervailing dominant narratives that highlight the intensity of the trauma caused by the Cultural Revolution, multiple memories emerged in literature to draw attention to the non-traumatic aspects of the Cultural Revolution experiences. As my study reveals, the non-traumatic memories of the Cultural Revolution have allowed some social groups and individuals to forge identities out of that of a collectively defined political victim. For instance, instead of accepting the label as "the lost generations," some former Red Guards and educated youths claimed themselves to be "minjian cultural elites" whose Cultural Revolution experiences were particularly rewarding in terms of knowledge accumulation and individual development. Rebuffing the dominant narrative of blame that portrays children as the innocent victims of the Cultural Revolution, Wang Shuo's two works identify a specific group of teenagers as the privileged few who enjoyed the fun of their lifetime in an unrestricted era.

While the counternarratives on the Cultural Revolution challenge the dominant condemnation narratives, their acknowledgements of certain "realities" of this history have more to do with the power struggles in the present than the authenticity of specific personal memories. As Steve Sangren has argued, studying cultural change is not a simple matter of pointing out "resistances" and "alternatives" in the practices of the formerly disadvantaged or marginalized,

since “resistances” and “alternatives” can both “change” and “reproduce” power relations (2000, 228). In this sense, the significance of the non-traumatic memories on the Cultural Revolution in literature has to be evaluated by analyzing who benefits from specific counternarratives versus who bears the cost of them, which brings into consideration the discursive functions of literature in the concrete context of their production and reception.

As my research shows, the emergence of counternarratives on the Cultural Revolution has contributed to the creation of individual and collective identities refusing to claim victimization from this history. At the same time, the production and reception of these narratives have also been socially marked and ideologically charged, which makes the evocation of personal memory counterdiscursive in one context and power-driven in another. In the case of the Zhu Xueqin and Xu Youyu, personal memories are used by the authors to dissociate themselves from the officially projected image of the Red Guard and educated youth in order to establish a certain individuality. Nevertheless, this individuality is actually based on identification with a new collective—liberal intellectuals. By affiliating themselves with this particular collective, these scholars make an effort to defend their elite status in a commercialized society and to assert their narrative authority in a rapidly changing cultural field. In Wang Shuo’s recent works, a fond memory toward the Cultural Revolution outs “play” in the foreground as a privilege enjoyed by the selective few. A nostalgic recollection of the Cultural Revolution thus provides reference to identify certain lifestyles as cool and fashionable, which served the present need of social stratification. Wang Xiaobo’s two

novellas inquire into the complicated relationship between political power, sexuality, and human identity. Yet, as Wang Xiaobo is promoted in the media's construction as a cultural icon representing a lifestyle of "freedom," his writings have been inevitably incorporated into a discursive practice that legitimates the validity of an emerging urban youth subculture. Some recent fictional works by Yu Hua and Wang Anyi endorse the fortitudinous survival of ordinary people despite the violent intervention of history. Still, the mundane life affirmed in their writings can be distanced from the practical living condition of the socially marginalized and materially subordinated when it is assigned with transcendental meanings or treated as the object of aesthetic contemplation.

Over the course of this dissertation, I have studied the non-traumatic narratives on the Cultural Revolution as a dimension of difference based on which certain dominant narratives of this history were challenged, alternative individual and group identities were claimed, and particular personal, cultural and social needs were addressed. The emergence and reception of counternarratives on the Cultural Revolution are indicative of the agitation provoked by the struggles of different value systems, the impact of a rapidly developing market, the uneasiness accompanying the reshuffle of social stratification, and the redistribution of power within the field of cultural production. In conclusion, I argue that while sharing a common gesture of redeeming personal memories from a collective past, counternarratives on the Cultural Revolution in the 1990s were used in various ways to serve the present needs. In different cases, the construction of an "alternative reality" of the Cultural Revolution could serve as a coping strategy

that fulfils personal or psychological needs, as a means to legitimize new intellectual trends, as a way to boost an emerging cultural fashion, or as a weapon with which cultural agents contend for positions in a drastically restructured and restructuring cultural field.

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